

The Crypto Kids by theawkwardunderscore

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

[Byeler] Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas need a way to communicate with each other in secret. As Mike and Will grow closer, a mysterious new character arrives at Hawkins Middle School.

1. The Note & The Solution

THE CRYPTO KIDS

CHAPTER 1: THE NOTE & THE SOLUTION

TRIGGERS: Mild homophobic themes (off-handish comments made by bullies).

CONTENT WARNINGS: None. Just fluff.

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Mike Wheeler was sitting outside the principal's office at Hawkins High School. He was fiddling with his fingers nervously - there were many students who could sit outside the principal's office without feeling a pang of guilt, a sense of apprehension or a deep feeling of foreboding. Mike Wheeler was not one of these students. Despite his own attempts to convince himself that he was rebellious, Mike was a good kid. It was in fact quite a curious sight to see him outside the principal's office, which had provoked many questioning looks from students and teachers alike passing by.

It wasn't too long before Karen Wheeler, Mike's mother, arrived. She looked disappointed and confused and Mike could only manage a contorted look of guilt. Of all the parents who had children at Hawkins Middle, Karen was the most surprised to receive a call for a behavioral consultation. She didn't even have to ask Mike to get up and walk into the principal's office when she arrived, he just knew to follow her.

Mike hated the principal's office. Mr. Johnson was a formidable individual, who Mike believed hated children. (Why would you become a teacher if you hate children, he frequently questioned.)

'Mrs Wheeler, thank you for coming on such short notice. I'm sure you must be surprised. Mike is *usually* a good kid.'

Mike stared, indignantly.

‘So what’s he done?’ Karen’s voice demonstrated a complete lack of interest in whatever anecdotal drawl Mr. Daniel Johnson had prepared. She, more than anyone, knew that this was most likely a misunderstanding.

‘He passed a note in class, Mrs. Wheeler. A rather shocking one, actually.’

Mike shuffled back in his seat as Karen turned her intimidating gaze towards him.

‘Mike?’ She simply said.

‘I was just trying to be funny,’ he said, softly.

‘I have the note here, Mrs Wheeler,’ Mr. Johnson stated in an annoyingly proud tone. He handed a ruined piece of notepaper to Karen, who was able to barely make out, “When Mrs. Adams speaks, her entire face moves! Like a frog!”

Karen suppressed a laugh. Mrs. Adams was Mike’s English-literature teacher and she had been nothing but a pain. She always told Mike that his stories didn’t fit the grading criteria, or that his work wasn’t “up-to-standard” because he wrote about “all that science stuff”. And if that wasn’t enough, what Mrs. Adams did to one of Mike’s best friends, Will Byers, couldn’t even be repeated. His mother begged to have his class changed but the school refused.

‘Thank you Mr. Johnson, I will deal with this at home,’ Karen said, without looking up from the note, pocketing it immediately.

‘I really do insist that the school is kept in the loop on the disciplinary actions you take. Mrs. Adams is—’

‘A grown woman who has certainly seen her fair share of tom-foolery in her time teaching seventh grade English.’

Mr. Johnson nodded slightly. He had been very much aware of the history between Mrs. Adams, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers, Dustin Henderson and Lucas Sinclair. She always complained about them in the staffroom, where other teachers had only positive things to say. Mr. Clarke ran to their defence on an almost-daily basis. Of course,

he couldn't say any of this to Karen Wheeler.

Karen and Mike walked out of the principal's office. Nothing was said on the walk to the car. Mike stared at the ground, kicking rocks as he walked in a very 'disaffected-youth' manner.

They both got in the car but Karen didn't turn the ignition. Mike sighed, ready for the onslaught.

'Why?' she simply asked.

'I was trying to be funny.'

'You are funny and you don't have to be mean to be funny. Michael, you can talk to me.'

'I know. Don't worry. I'm sorry, okay? I should apologise to Mrs. Adams. It won't happen again.'

Karen knew that he meant it. Irrespective of whatever nonsense that Mrs. Monique Adams liked to feed herself, she knew that Mike was a good kid.

She ruffled his long hair, started the car and began to drive out of the parking lot.

Of course, Mike didn't want to reveal why he did it. The truth was that Will Byers, Mike's best friend, had drawn a picture with the story they had to write for class. Will drew the picture at home, in his own time to hand in with the story. They had to write a story about a book they were reading, "The Catcher in the Rye". Will wrote about a young super villain who was raised to be, you guessed it, an evil genius. In it, the character he developed found "evil" to be a horrible thing to be and decided not to conform. He ended up rejecting his superpowers and living an average life. The idea of it was that he didn't conform, which was a significant part of "The Catcher in the Rye". When Will told Mike about it, Mike thought the idea was genius. His story paled in comparison to that of his friend.

Well, today, they'd gotten the grades back for their stories. Mike got a B-, although he's convinced it's far more political. There's no way he'd get the same grade as Troy. For anything. But what was most

shocking is that Will received an F, with big, red sharpie through the pictures he drew at the end, screaming *"NO PICTURES IN STORIES! PICTURES ARE FOR CHILDREN!"*

Will sat three desks away from Mike and Mike could see his eyes welling up. He knew. Mike always knew. He didn't know exactly what happened but he knew that Mrs. Adams had ruined his best friend's day. And he was going to cheer him up.

The note had meant to get to Will. Dustin, one of Mike & Will's best friends, accidentally dropped it on the floor. It was picked up by Troy, who handed it to Mrs. Adams. Luckily, nobody knew it was intended for Will and Mike took the fall. He wasn't going to let Will's day get worse.

As he got home, he acknowledged his dad, walked upstairs to his room and shut the door. Karen couldn't help but laugh. Her gorgeous son was now a God-forsaken *adult*.

Mike had other plans. He knew Mrs. Adams wasn't very smart and he knew that, if someone wasn't very smart, they were easy to fool. He wanted to be able to communicate with Will when he was upset in class but now that Mrs. Adams knew he passed notes, she'd be even more vigilant. He couldn't get caught. He had to be smarter about it. And if he was going to do that, he needed more knowledge.

As punishment, Karen wouldn't let him out to go to Will's. She said she was being generous and in hindsight, he'd probably think this too. But he was angry at this point. He wanted to make sure his best friend was okay.

He had his dinner (chicken and vegetables, how suburban), washed up his plate and went to bed, angry.

Will's night hadn't been that fun, either. He'd spent most of it in Castle Byers, the hideaway he'd built in his backyard. Unlike Mike, Will could be honest with himself about his feelings. He just had a better knack for emotional connection, which is probably what made him a good artist. But it's worth noting that on this day in particular,

Will didn't *feel* like a good artist. He knew that Mrs. Adams was a moron but it still hurt. He put a lot of effort into those drawings. He knew that Mrs. Adams was an "asshole", as Lucas so eloquently phrased it. But he didn't like to be on bad terms with anyone and he hoped that the drawing he did might add a level of difference to his story, that she'd appreciate. He had horribly miscalculated. She'd destroyed him. He had spent most of recess crying in the boys restroom. Mike came to check on him and he managed to swallow enough of his tears to pretend that he felt sick. He knew Mike knew he was upset, and Mike knew that Will knew Mike knew he was upset, but for the sake of adolescent male pride, nobody said anything. Will didn't like people knowing he was emotional. His father made it very clear that real men don't cry. Ever.

Joyce, Will's mother, had known something was up. She had made scrambled eggs, one of Will's favourites and he was grateful but didn't seem to be as interested. Joyce wondered if something had gotten him down or if he was simply making the inexorable transformation into an adult. Jonathan, Will's older brother, had noticed something as well. But Jonathan didn't want to say anything either. He and Joyce spent dinner darting looks of concern at each other, although Will didn't seem to notice.

But what bothered Will most of all is that Mike got in trouble. Mrs. Adams humiliated him. Will really liked Mike, they'd been friends for ages and for some reason, he felt a stronger attachment to Mike than his other friends. Maybe it was because Mike got him, had always been encouraging and always been kind to him, even if he was mad. Once, Will had spilt his orange juice all over Mike's math homework book. Where most sixth grade boys would absolutely lose their minds, Mike just said "Ah! Shit. Ahh well, we can always just re-do the questions. I think I remember most of the answers." At the time, Will wasn't sure if this was Mike showing how much he really cared about Will or if he just secretly enjoyed doing math. At the time, Will concluded that the latter was true but in retrospect, he wasn't so sure. What he was sure about was that Mike *always* protected him. Always. He never felt unsafe around Mike and whenever possible, he would be near him.

Today in class, when Mike had taken the blame for the note, Mrs.

Adams made him stand up and read it out loud. Will tried very hard to suppress the laugh and managed exceptionally well. Mrs. Adams was offended and told Mike that he looked like a frog. Now, everyone calls him frog-face. Will couldn't handle that he had caused a mass-offensive on his best friend, who happily took the fall and the brutality that followed because he cared enough about Will. Will felt awful and was overcome by guilt. What Mrs. Adams did to Will was atrocious. Joyce didn't even know. She thinks she does but she only knows about the horrible comments she's left on his writing. She doesn't know about the *other* thing. But Will could let that go. What he couldn't let go was what she did to Mike.

Will knew he was angry. Possibly more angry than he'd ever been in his life. Will was a peaceful, loving person. He wouldn't wish death upon his worst enemy and always saw the good in everyone. But he was mad. My God, was he mad. He'd lost a bit of confidence in his drawing abilities but that didn't matter right now. What mattered was making Mike happy.

The next morning, Will reflected on his dream. He'd had a strange dream that he kissed a frog and it turned into Mike. He concluded he'd been watching way too much Disney. He woke up and stumbled his way into the kitchen, where Jonathan was making breakfast.

'Morning.'

'Hey Jonathan,' Will said, glumly. He was not a morning person. He'd much rather be up all night and sleep all day. Jonathan served up some bacon and eggs, as well as some orange juice and sat down with him and Joyce at the table. He liked family breakfasts. Most families do family dinners but usually at night, either Jonathan or Joyce were working, so family breakfasts were the M.O. in the Byers household. Will got lost in the conversation and suddenly, his problems regarding Mike and Mrs. Adams no longer plagued him - at least for now.

Mike more-or-less *stampeded* down the stairs. Karen had made bacon

and eggs for breakfast too, which Mike took as quickly as he could without being impolite.

‘Mom! Mom! MOM!’

‘Michael! Don’t yell at me.’

‘Sorry, sorry. I’m sorry. Is it okay if I go to Will’s before school this morning?’

Karen smiled. ‘Sure, just make sure you eat your breakfast first.’ Karen noticed Mike was already dressed, with headphones coming out of his bag - no doubt connected to his walkman.

‘No problem,’ said Mike, as he could be seen stuffing the bacon and eggs into a bread roll.

‘Michael,’ Karen said forcefully, though quietly amused.

Mike smiled, yelled ‘Bye everyone! Have a good day!’ and left as quickly as he’d arrived.

Karen couldn’t help but smile, subtly. She knew a lot more about this world than that for which Mike would give her credit. Mike doesn’t know that Karen’s best childhood friend is a lesbian. Mike doesn’t know that she knows. She knows everything because mothers always know.

‘Go get him, Mikey’ she said, softly, while frying more eggs.

He was eating while riding his bike. He was listening to his Queen mixtape that Will had made for him.

Buddy you’re a young man, hard man,

Shouting in the street, gonna take on the world someday!

You got blood on your face,

You big disgrace,

Wavin’ your banner all over the place!

He was finally balancing all the things he was trying to do. He was managing to ride his bike, eat his bacon and egg roll and get lost in the music. He was on Will's street and about 150 feet from Will's place, Mike came to an abrupt, metallic stop. He smashed into a pole and was propelled forward at a high velocity. Luckily, he was wearing a helmet. He was really, really beaten, though. He grazed both of his legs and was bleeding. He was holding back tears. *Michael, toughen up, get moving*, he said to himself. He finally managed to get to his feet and pick his bicycle up, so he could walk it all the way to Will's. He made it just as Joyce and Jonathan had left for work. He knocked on the door and Will answered, eagerly.

'JESUS!' Will exclaimed.

'What did you do,' he continued.

'Hit a pole,' Mike said, dismissively. He didn't really want to show too much vulnerability. He remembered last time he fell off his bike. He'd come home and his father had told him to "toughen up", so that's what was going through his mind right now.

'Let me get the first aid kit,' said Will, as he rummaged under the kitchen bench. He found a box with a big, green cross on it.

'Bingo!' he said.

'You really are going to too much trouble,' Mike said, ignoring the bleeding from his legs and the continuing pain.

'But I appreciate it,' Mike added, smiling. Nobody fussed over him when he was hurt like Will did.

'Uh-huh,' said Will, opening the first aid kit. He'd seen his mother do this too many times. He knew what he had to do. He sat Mike down on a chair and sat on the floor in front of his legs. He noticed that the graze on his left leg was significantly larger than the right, so he got a small bandage and a larger one. He also found a couple of alcohol swabs.

'Mike, this is going to sting. Don't hate me, okay?'

'I could never hate you.'

‘Are you ready?’ Asked Will, ripping the wrapping off an alcohol swab.

‘Yeah.’ Mike tightened every muscle in his body.

Will swashed the chemically altered fabric across Mike’s smaller wound. He winced.

‘I’m sorry, I just don’t want it to get infected.’

‘It’s fine, you’re doing great,’ Mike managed to mumble, between his painful shocks.

Will cleaned the wound and applied the bandage. He then repeated the process, except this time he got two alcohol swabs at once.

‘This is going to kill but it’ll get done faster.’

Mike just nodded. Will swabbed as quickly as he could and Mike started to move his leg.

‘Hold still!’

‘Sorry, sorry!’

Will finally got it cleaned up and applied the second bandage.

‘Better?’

Mike nodded.

‘You’re amazing, William Byers.’

Will blushed, ever so noticeably. Mike couldn’t help but smile to himself. Will meant so much to him.

Will gave Mike some left over bacon and eggs because he knew that to get here this early, he’d have to have skipped breakfast. Will promised to walk with Mike to and from school, since there was no way Mike was going to be riding his bike.

‘Mike, let’s go!’ Will was always in a hurry to get to school. He liked to learn. Mike did too but he’d never admit it. Will thought his

closeted nerdiness was cute.

They started walking and Mike wasted no time. They weren't even out of Will's front yard before Mike got what he wanted to say out.

'So about yesterday, I just—'

'Mike, I should be apologising to you. What she did to you was so mean. I'm sorry. I really am sorry.'

Mike put an arm around Will. (He must need help walking, Will thought.)

'You shouldn't be apologising to me. What she did was nothing compared to what she did to you.'

Will was just looking at the ground as they walked. He was distracted by Mike's converses.

'All I'm saying is that you didn't have to take the fall like that.' Will had so much guilt that it was spilling out of his ears.

'And all I'm saying is that you're my friend, it's my job to watch your back. Don't worry about me.'

Will looked at Mike and smiled. He still felt absolutely terrible but one thing was becoming increasingly apparent to Will.

Nobody in this world was as kind-hearted, well-meaning or selfless as Mike Wheeler.

Troy and his group of misfits made a few comments about Mike walking with Will into school.

'Been on your knees for Byers, Wheeler?'

Will winced. He hated being bullied. He had never hurt anyone, started a malicious rumor. He was never rude. He was never offensive. And yet, Troy and his friends through knives at Will all day, every day, for no reason other than the blindingly obvious fact

that Will was “different.”

‘Ignore them, Will.’

‘I always do,’ came the reply. Will was trying to convince himself more than Mike, though.

Will pretended that the bullying didn’t affect him. But it did. Mike knew it did. Dustin and Lucas knew it did. Joyce knew it did. Will was bullied the worst out of all of them. He was attacked so continuously and so ruthlessly. But nobody, except his friends, really knew him. Nobody really knew all the things he could do. Nobody knew of his genius, his creativity, his warmth or his kindness. But that’s the consequence of bullying; you only see the world from an upside down perspective: one of coldness, death and decay. You never see the light because you never seek happiness, only power over the vulnerable. And to Will, that was the most un-evolved human urge. He almost pitied it.

School was otherwise uneventful. Dustin, Lucas, Will and Mike all had AV club after school. Hawkins High had just bought a new radio device, through which the gang could reach Australia. In Will’s mind, Dustin had way too much fun putting on an Australian accent. But he nonetheless got a reply.

‘Aye mate, this is Jackson from Mosman High School in Sydney! What’s it like over in Indiana?’

The boys cackled with excitement and they continued to exchange witty remarks with their newfound Australian radiopal.

When AV club finished, Mr. Clarke came to get them out of the room. Mr. Clarke was the science teacher at Hawkins High and by far the boys’ favourite. Dustin admired his eccentricities, Lucas admired his knowledge, Mike admired his leadership skills (he was able to silence bullies with nothing more than a look) and Will admired his genuine and loving nature.

Then Mike had a thought. He remembered that he spent at least an hour the night before, trying to think of a way that he could talk to Will (and for that matter, Dustin and Lucas) in class without

attracting the prying eye of mouth-breathers or a teacher. He figured that if the radio waves were so easily accessible, how on earth could militaries communicate without their enemies just listening in? What about the internet? Surely there's some science behind secret-keeping. So, he did what any self-motivated, highly intelligent and resourceful High School kid does: he asked his teacher.

Mr. Clarke always appreciated Mike's questions. They were always so well-thought out.

Mike raised his hand.

Mr. Clarke chuckled. He saw these boys every day and they still had the greatest respect for him as a teacher.

'What's your question, Mike?'

'So you know how we use the radio? What do governments do? You know, to keep their secrets secret?'

'Well that's a good question, Mike!'

Mike stared at him, readily expecting an answer.

'There's an entire science to secret keeping, actually. It's called cryptography. It started all the way back with Julius Caesar, wanting to communicate to his various military outposts. If he was to simply write in what is called *plaintext*, that is, what you and I would be able to recognise as English words, people could just kill his messenger and have the information. But by developing what is called a 'key' that only Caesar himself and the outpost had, nobody could know what the text meant. And this would be called the ciphertext. In the world today, cryptanalysts try to decode ciphertexts.'

'Okay, so how would someone create a 'key' as you said?' Mike was following this conversation completely, as were the other three.

'Well, you've started to learn about functions in pre-calc, right?'

The boys nodded.

'Well, keys are just formulas. Uhh, give me a function with some

addition in it.'

'F of x equals x plus four,' Dustin called out.

'Right, so...' Mr. Clarke drew $f(x) = x + 4$ on the chalkboard.

'So here we have it. Imagine x is the letter on the paper; you move four letters along the alphabet to find what the letter actually is. And cryptographically speaking, this would simply be $k=4$, as a basic function for an alphabet key.'

Lucas understood completely.

'So, rather than writing "Hello" you would instead write "LIPPA"? Because L is four letters from H and I is four from E and so on.'

'Exactly! And yes, you were right. That's basically how Caesar worked.'

Will spoke up. 'But couldn't someone smart work out how to get around that? Surely, they could work out what your key is.'

'Ahh, yes! As I said before, those people are called cryptanalysts. Their entire job is to work out what ciphers mean. And now that we have complex computer algorithms making and breaking codes, it's becoming a very important skill.' Mr. Clarke's voice raised in excitement.

'It's certainly a very exciting field!' He wished he could go on but it was getting late. He sent the boys home. He made sure he saw them all leave before he left the school himself. He and his partner, Jen, were considering having children. Mr. Scott Clarke only hoped they were as curious and scientifically-minded as the AV gang.

Dustin and Lucas walked their bikes home so they could keep up with Mike and Will, who eventually told them it was fine to ride. Lucas figured they felt guilty but Dustin felt that there was something more. But oh well, he had heaps of stuff to do so he didn't give it too much thought.

After they were out of sight, Mike put his arm back around Will's shoulder. (He couldn't possibly have spontaneously needed help

walking, after walking on his own the whole way here, Will thought. But, he didn't complain.)

'So Will, wanna make a key?'

'What?'

'Well, you heard Mr. Clarke. You need to create a key. We need to create ciphers to send notes to each other in class.'

Will was astounded. Mike was truly the group leader. He always had a way to watch out for everyone and keep everyone happy. He didn't like to admit it but Mike, in a really weird, strange way was like the dad, or the older brother, of the group. He just seemed to always know what to do, what to say and what to think. It impressed Will to no end.

So, Mike and Will diverted to the local college library (they could always find good stuff there). They both found two books on cryptography each and promised each other they'd study and read up on them, then compare notes the same time next week. Will had found a book called *From Caesar to Cipher: The History of Codes and Crypto: The Science of Secrets*. Mike, on the other hand, had chosen more mathematical material. He'd found *Introductory Cryptographic Mathematics* and *Modulus Arithmetic & Cryptography*.

Will walked Mike home, even though Mike said he didn't need to. Will didn't care. Besides, it was getting dark and Will felt a lot safer with Mike. When they arrived, Karen had been serving up dinner.

'Michael! I've been so worried about you! Where have you be—'

She saw Will outside at the last second.

'Will, honey, what are you doing out this late?'

'Oh, err, sorry Mrs. Wheeler, I was just—'

'He helped me with my grazes,' Mike said, as he gestured to his legs.

Karen looked at his legs, looked at Will, looked at Mike, then told them both to get inside, so the cool air didn't come in.

‘Will, I’ll give your mom a call. She’s probably worried sick.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler,’ replied Will, as they both went upstairs to Mike’s room.

Joyce eventually agreed to let Will stay over at Mike’s because it was far too late for Will to walk home. So, they both quickly ate dinner, got ready for bed and spent way too long talking in Mike’s room. They were experts at speaking quietly, so Karen wouldn’t hear. I mean, they thought she wouldn’t hear, but she did.

‘Boys! It’s a school night! Go to sleep!’

Mike sighed, exasperated. Will just smiled and said, ‘Of course, Mrs. Wheeler!’ Many would expect older teenagers to sound indignant, even rude in this situation. But not Will Byers. Will appreciated any ounce of care he got, even if it was his best friend’s mother more-or-less telling them both to shut up.

Mike got up off the floor, stretched and moved into bed.

‘Goodnight, Will,’ Mike said through a yawn, obviously sleepy. Then, something strange happened. Will propelled himself off the blowup mattress and hugged Mike. Tightly. Tighter than Mike had ever been hugged. Will’s small arms wrapt around Mike, almost as if holding onto him was the difference between life and death.

‘Goodnight, Mike,’ he said, still hugging him. When the two released, they brushed their hands past each others’. Mike watched both of their hands as Will slowly returned his to his side.

‘You’re the coolest, Wheeler.’

‘Hey, you too, Byers,’ Mike said, grinning like a six year-old who had just got cotton candy. He wrapped himself in his covers and Will went back to the mattress. Will hit the light switch on his way into bed and fell asleep within seconds. Not much made Will more happy than a hug from Mike Wheeler.

Mike, however, was up for a while. He couldn’t stop thinking about that hug. It took him some time to admit it to himself but the truth was that Mike felt differently about Will Byers, compared to all of his

friends. Will was special to Mike. When Will was in trouble, it hurt Mike just as much. And when Will was happy, it made Mike just as happy. Eventually, he fell asleep, smiling gleefully.

That was the first time Mike Wheeler admitted to himself that he had feelings for Will Byers.

2. The Modulus & The Man on Mirkwood

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Will have finally finished their research on some basic cryptography. They're certain they've come up with a key that will stump any intruders. But something more alarming lurks in the shadows...

Chapter 2: The Modulus & The Man on Mirkwood

Trigger Warnings: Extremely mild homophobia.

Content Warnings: **MATH:** Can't write a cryptography-based fic without including math. Just give it a chance! It's kind of important and it makes for some cute moments later. Trust me :)) If you don't know how it works, let me know and I will explain it in further detail. *MY ASK IS ALWAYS OPEN FOR MATH QUESTIONS RE. THIS FIC.* **THRILLER:** This chapter includes elements of thriller but y'all watched *Stranger Things* so you'll be fine.

A week had passed since Mike and Will both agreed to do their research on cryptography. Dustin and Lucas had also pitched in and the gang decided that they would have a key system, as well. Dustin and Lucas didn't know about Will and Mike's code, though. That was still an enigma to them.

Mike and Will had agreed to meet in Mike's basement, so at the end of the day, both of them went to Mike's house. Lucas and Dustin both had a massive amount of homework to do from Mrs. Adams, whereas Joyce had found out about what Mrs. Adams had wrote about Will's work, so she had written him a note, saying that he will not be completing homework until it can be graded fairly. Ms. Joyce Byers would not be tolerating that kind of behaviour towards her children,

thank you very much. Mike, on the other hand, was beyond caring about his English-lit homework. He was a good creative writer. He knew it. Will knew it. His friends knew it (he was the game-master after all). His family knew it. He didn't need the approval of his out-of-touch English teacher. And so, Mike had decided that creating a cryptographic key with Will was significantly more important to him and his best friend than writing a four and a half page essay on *The Sound and the Fury*.

Will finally arrived at Mike's, saying hello to his entire family before seeing Mike (he was always so polite). He hugged Mike briefly, before sitting down and pulling out his notes on cryptography.

Hugs had replaced handshakes between the two, when they were alone. Ever since that spontaneous hug, where for a split nanosecond, the dimensions of the multiverse seemed to align in a constant phase, blending together the complexity of matter itself into an explosive interpolation of what the two could only describe as "something more than friendship".

Will started to unpack his cryptography notes and Mike could only gaze in astonishment. Mike's notes had been structured, carefully ruled and written in the neatest print he could manage. Will's notes had neat drawings all down the side, the seal of the U.S. National Security Agency, a drawing of Enigma, the German coding machine that sent signals between U-Boats in the second world war, as well as a variety of other things that Mike couldn't identify.

'Holy crap,' Mike managed.

'What? Is it messy? I always go so overboard.'

Mike was astonished. For someone with so much talent, he had such little confidence.

'Will, that's amazing. You're honestly so talented.'

Will couldn't help but smile. He found it hard to accept compliments, mostly because he always felt there was someone with an equally negative opinion of his abilities or who he was entirely. But approval from Mike, and all of his friends as well, meant a lot to him. Will was

surrounded by people who loved him, all in their own way, and that was all he needed. At least for now.

Mike found his notes as well. They'd both taken the time to peruse through two books each, a project that took up most of the week and the entire weekend. After comparing notes, the two made a list of things they noticed about cryptography.

WILL AND MIKE'S LIST:

- Cryptography is the scientific field of secret keeping.
- It combines advanced mathematics, computer science and electrical engineering.
- The way it works is that messages are written in a human language (known as 'plaintext') are turned into codes, that only the sender and receiver can decode. These coded messages are called 'ciphers' or 'cipher-text'.
- The idea of cryptography is to create ciphers and cipher-texts that will keep your messages safe.
- Cryptanalysts have the job of decoding intercepted cipher-text, as to reveal the secret.
- Cryptography is used mostly by governments but also by large businesses and criminal organisations.
- Computers and the Internet use cryptography more and experts say that it will lead to a lot more cryptography jobs.

'Our project needs a cool codename,' Will insisted.

'What, why?'

'Because it's like a secret list. It's like we've done secret, government-type research and that sort of stuff always has codenames.'

Mike thought about it for a second. His colleague enjoyed the dramatics of *every* situation.

'How about Project Iceman,' Mike suggested.

Will looked at him sympathetically.

'Project X?'

‘Taken. Neither of us are Charles Xavier,’ Will countered.

Both just stared at their papers, trying desperately to come up with something cool.

‘Project Modulus!’ Mike’s sudden cheerfulness made Will jump.

‘What?’

‘Project Modulus! You know, like modulus equations!’

Will stared at him, curious but confused. He contorted his face.

‘Modulus arithmetic,’ Mike began. ‘It’s a system of mathematics whereby natural numbers “wrap around” each other. So clocks, for example. If the time is 2:26 and you add 14 hours, it becomes 16:26. But, if you add another 14 hours to that, the time becomes 6:26, not 30:26.’

Admittedly, Mike was a brilliant maths student. Will was certainly able to hold his own in class but he wasn’t anywhere near Mike. He did remember that one of the cryptography books that Mike had gotten had been related to math. He looked at him for further clarification. Mike noticed.

‘Okay, imagine a loop. And on that loop, you have numbers one through to, say, ten. Your modulus function can therefore not produce a result greater than ten, or less than one. And, if you have a value larger, say, fifteen, the answer the the equation is five.’

Will still looked somewhat confused.

‘Will, divide fifteen by ten.’

‘One, remainder five, so one and a half.’ Will seemed proud. He understood that part.

‘Right, so with a modulus function, it doesn’t matter how many times the number goes into the original mod number. What matters is the end result. So you can theoretically go around the loop, between one to ten, one hundred times and land on five. Say you had one hundred and five. You’d go around the loop ten times and land on five, after

you'd gone around the loop. So the answer is five. Similarly, if you had fifteen, you'd go around the loop once and also land on five. So the answer would still be five.'

Will was starting to understand.

'So it's like a gigantic clock but with a theoretically unlimited amount of hours? Like, you can change the hours based on your needs?'

'Exactly!' Mike seemed relieved that he'd gotten this across.

'Okay, so why are you telling me this?' Will definitely wanted something in return for enduring a conversation about college-level algebra.

'We need to use a modulus equation to make our key.'

'Why? Surely there's something simpler?'

'No, no. As soon as people realise we're speaking in code, they'll try to decrypt it. You read about cryptanalysis, right? We already know that mathematics is a huge part. They could get maths students on this, maths teachers. You know that Jamie Danton's dad has a PhD in Mathematics? He's on the school district board!'

'I don't know if they'd take it that far.'

'I don't want to take any chances. Most teachers probably don't remember what modulus arithmetic is and if they do, they certainly won't expect two middle schoolers to know what it is.'

Will knew he was right because he wasn't still completely confident with what it was. Mike relaxed a bit.

'I don't know, I just want our notes to be private.'

The emotions started to simmer again from last week. Both Mike and Will still felt guilty about letting the other down, in their own ways.

'Let's do it,' Will said, smiling. 'You're right, nobody will know what a modulus does.'

Mike's eyes lit up. He always thought that Will's special ability was to draw, to create. Mike's ability was to lead and to learn. He knew that to be ahead of the crowd and to win, you had to know science. Science was everything. Science was, and always will be, power. And nothing made him happier than being able to protect Will.

'Okay, here's what we'll use,' Mike said, grabbing a new piece of paper in a very aggressive, impatient way, which annoyed Will's artistic sensibilities.

Mike scribbled out some complex lettering, that Will couldn't understand. When he was finished, it read:

$A \bmod(26) = B \pmod{26}$

ASSUME: A is a real number that represents the cipher text input, B is the output, applied to a modulus function of 26.

Will contorted his face, trying to make sense of the mess on the paper, that Will was sure would have confused Euclid himself.

'Do you get it?'

Will shook his head innocently. He honestly wondered if *Mike* even got it.

A flash of excitement showed on Mike's face. He loved explaining things like this.

'Okay, so, we're using a mod value of 26 because there are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. So, each number, from one to twenty-six, corresponds with a letter. So, one is equal to A, three is equal to C and so on.'

Will was nodding.

'A is the value of the cipher letter. So, rather than writing 1, I'd write 27, because $27 \bmod(26)$ equals one, so in this case, $B=1$, which is equal to A. Because it resets itself at the 26th number in each series, giving us an alphabet. But, if I wrote $1 \bmod(26)$ that would also equal one. And this is how we can use the code.'

‘So why not have numbers from one to twenty-six and ignore the modulus completely?’

‘Because that’s *easy*, Will. Rather than that, we can have numbers that go to infinity and still know what it means. The one-to-twenty-six alphabet code has been so overused.’

Will was starting to get it.

‘Here, I’ll show you an example.’

Mike scribbled something onto the paper. The result was two numbers.

788-24813

‘Use the mod to decode that.’

Will studied the numbers and followed the steps. He worked out that $788 \bmod(26)=8$ and, after some quick arithmetic, that $24813 \bmod(26)=9$. The eighth letter of the English alphabet was H and the ninth was I. Mike had written Hi. And all of a sudden, it clicked. You could have a code written in infinitely large numbers, right next to small, tiny numbers, like seven or twelve. Nobody could ever decode this as the pattern would look completely random.

‘You’re a genius, Michael Wheeler.’

Mike smiled. Will’s approval meant so much more to him. Mike ruffled his hair.

‘Why don’t we use hyphens to show spaces between letters and slashes to show spaces between words,’ Will suggested.

He got a piece of paper and started scribbling quickly. He wrote out as quickly as possible,

788-23813/96-9-110043-447-25.

He slid the paper over to Mike. Mike decoded it abnormally fast. Will had written: H-i/M-i-k-e-y. Hi Mikey. And it made sense. He’d used hyphens to show gaps between numbers, so that letters could be

easily decoded but slashes to show the beginning of a new word. It was genius.

‘William Byers,’ Mike paused, smiled and looked Will in the eye. ‘You’re a God-damn genius.’

Mike and Will moved over to the couch, Mike bringing his notebook and Will bringing his sketchbook.

Will shuffled to rest up against him, smiling. Mike didn’t flinch.

‘You know, modulus stuff reminds me a lot of absolute value,’ Mike said, aimlessly, while staring at his notes. Will couldn’t help but smile. Mike didn’t think the same way Will did. Mike didn’t think about stories, about crazy monsters, about wizards fighting in the dark alleyways of Chicago, or on mystical lands. Mike didn’t think about the dangers of an alternate dimension, or how far emotions could take a character. Mike didn’t think about character arcs, or story climaxes or things like that. Surely, he could. He was a creative kid. Playing as dungeon-master proved that and he thought about this stuff when they all played together. But it wasn’t his focus. Out of all things, Mike was a strategic thinker. He was a leader. And beyond that, he was a scientist. He had a mind for anything and everything he could possibly enjoy. Mike Wheeler had no intellectual shortcomings, as far as Will could notice.

‘Hey Mike,’ Will asked, quietly. ‘Why do you like math so much?’

‘I don’t like math,’ he retorted.

‘Michael Wheeler, weren’t you ever told not to lie?’ Will had a gnawing cheer to his tone, as he kept scribbling in his sketchbook.

Mike looked at him and lowered his gaze, conceding.

‘I guess it’s because it’s all about what you can do with it. Math is like a giant toolbox. It goes into anything and everything we do. Math fixes everything. It’s a puzzle. It’s strategy. It’s logic. What’s not to like?’

Will wanted to make an “I hate math” comment but with Mike’s pure awe for the subject, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. The truth was

that Will didn't hate math, he was just no-where near as good at it as Mike was.

Will had just started doodling some designs for a "Project Modulus" logo, when dinner was called. He had come up with this idea of two hands, surrounded by loops. It seemed appropriate to have two hands, given that the key to Project Modulus was only available to Mike and himself. The rings, of course, were a visual way to represent a modulus equation.

Karen Wheeler was a fantastic cook. She cooked for Will at least once a week and usually the rest of the gang, too. Mike's older sister, Nancy, had always been fond of Will. She saw his sensitivity and gentleness. She most likely figured he'd be nothing but a good influence for her exceptionally annoying younger brother.

Karen had made an amazing beef roast for dinner. She'd always cooked well when Will had come around, as she knew it would give Joyce a break. She also knew that Will, having a mom who works almost constantly to provide the best she can for her sons, wouldn't have the time to make a home-cooked meal every night of the week. Will liked having dinner with his mom but always appreciated Karen's hospitality.

Conversation was what you would expect from a family dinner in Hawkins, Indiana. There were discussions of Mike's father's job (but not too much because Karen didn't like him talking about work at the dinner table), Karen checking on what Mrs. Adams had been up to the past week, Nancy asking if she could go out somewhere and Mike annoying Nancy. What are little brothers for, anyway?

Dinner ended very casually and very cordially (as it always did). The boys washed up their plates, as did Nancy. After Karen and Ted had left the table, Nancy was heading upstairs. Mike called out.

'Hey Nance,' he said, smiling.

She looked at him with a vacant, yet irritated expression.

'I'm having some trouble with my maths homework. Do you think you could help me?'

She looked troubled. Not once, in recorded history, had Mike ever asked Nancy for help with any kind of homework, especially math. It was widely regarded in the Wheeler household that Nancy had the sciences down but Mike was indomitable when it came to math. Will shot Mike a concerned glare.

‘I guess,’ she sighed.

Mike quite literally *bolted* from the table. He returned moments later, discretely winking at Will, as he plonked a piece of paper in front of Nancy. He’d clearly scribbled all over it in a dishevelled way. When deciphered, the scribble read:

RULE: $A \bmod(n) = B \pmod{n}$

Hence, $34 \bmod(8) = B \pmod{8}$. Solve for B.

Nancy had never seen anything like it. She’d never seen numbers arranged like that, or with that kind of notation. She was absolutely *convinced* that Mike had made this up. But there was absolutely no way that Nancy Wheeler could get away with saying *that*. So, she studied the arrangement of numbers carefully. It looked like an algebraic equation, so she arranged it as such. She’d noticed that between the “34” and the “mod” notation, as well as between the B and the mod notation, there was no sign. Mike must have forgotten to put in an addition symbol. So she corrected it and re-arranged it. Her brain was working wildly. She then thought for a second, grabbed the pen that Mike had given her and wrote down carefully:

$B = 3 + 2 \bmod(8)$.

‘There,’ she said.

Mike looked at her and said, ‘Oh, thanks Nance, you’re right.’

As Nancy went upstairs, she felt confused. She knew her brother well. She knew he was up to something. But that particular concern would have to wait for another day.

‘She’s way off,’ Will said.

‘Told you nobody would get it.’

‘It’s not even *close* to what you’re meant to do.’

‘I told you, didn’t I tell you?’

‘You did, you did. But it was kind of mean to do that to your sister, Mike.’

‘Ahh, she’s my sister. She’ll get over it. She *has* to love me. It’s in the rule book.’

‘Oh yeah? And which rule book is that?’

‘The Bible.’

Will couldn’t help but laugh. Mike smiled, clearly impressed with himself on all fronts.

Mike helped Will pack his bag (Karen had a very strict curfew on school nights). This time, Mike hugged Will, who seemed genuinely happy that this new routine was being reciprocated.

Mike saw him off, waited until he got to the end of the street, walked upstairs and plunged himself under a steaming hot shower.

Will’s relatively short ride home had given him a lot to think about. He thought about modulus equations. He noticed the wheels on his bike spinning and he couldn’t help but see the modulus rings that Mike was so excited about earlier.

Will turned down Mirkwood, a quiet road that worked as a short-cut to his house. Oddly, the road itself had no discernible name. It was where Cornwallis and Kerley roads met. “Mirkwood” was just the nickname the gang had given the road. Nobody knew why it was unnamed but Lucas said it was probably because the government wanted to keep the lab as hidden as possible. He rode past the obnoxiously large sign that read **“HAWKINS NATIONAL LAB. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. RESTRICTED AREA.”** Will had always wondered what was in that mysterious, government lab. There had always been rumours around school that they’d been experimenting on queers there. Will certainly hoped not.

As Will turned his head forwards, he couldn’t help but scream. He

could see a figure. A shadowy figure. It had long, dark cloths for clothing and it looked as though it was hovering. It was as if it were wearing tattered, black bedsheets. It stared at Will menacingly. As he got closer, he could see it was a person. A person wearing dark clothing. He could see it had white skin and was holding a knife. A really large knife. As he passed within earshot of the figure, it launched to grab him but Will veered to the other side of the road and peddled as fast as he could.

Will looked back and the figure seemed to have disappeared into the dark foliage. Will was so, so scared. He was terrified. He was shaking like he had hypothermia and he was hyperventilating. He thought about Mike. He wished Mike was here. He just wanted a hug. That's all he wanted. He wanted Mike to hold him once more. He felt protected with Mike.

He arrived home, tears rolling down his eyes and ran into his brothers room. Jonathan was still awake, listening to his stereo. When he saw Will, he became exceptionally alarmed.

'Jonathan! Jonathan! There was something in the bushes! Something —, I don't know, it was cloaked. I don't know! I just, it scared me, Jonathan. It had a knife. A really sharp, big knife. Almost like, a—a dagger.'

Jonathan hugged his brother.

'Shh, shh, it's okay. It's alright.'

Jonathan knew that *obviously* Will and Mike had been getting up to playing Dungeons and Dragons once again and Will's vivid imagination had slipped into his reality.

'I'm not seeing things, Jonathan. I'm not.'

'Will, come on man, it's bedtime.'

Jonathan fixed Will a glass of milk. Joyce arrived home just in time to say goodnight to Will, who was looking less troubled at this point. He went to bed without another word.

But Will knew that the problem with a vivid mind is that it goes both

ways. Almost like an absolute value problem. The absolute value of five, for example, can equal five, or negative five. It just means that it is five units in either direction. Well, creative and vibrant minds worked the same way. They could produce the most beautiful, enrapturing visions. They could inspire love, friendship and warmth. But they could also inspire terror, fear and evil.

Will had always had nightmares. He couldn't shake them. He told Mike and Dustin this once, some time ago. Dustin suggested that he needed to "get it off his mind" to get back to sleep, so he should draw it. So, Will grabbed his sketchbook, a flashlight and disappeared under the covers of his bed to draw what he could only think to call The Man on Mirkwood.

3. The Siblings and The New Kid

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Will both have something important to discuss with their siblings.

But what will a newcomer have in store for both of them?

THE CRYPTO KIDS

Chapter 3: **THE SIBLINGS AND THE NEW KID**

Trigger Warnings: Homophobia, homophobic insults. Violence.

Content Warnings: A LOT OF FLUFF OKAY LIKE PREPARE YOURSELF AND ALSO THE BYELER DEVELOPS FAST HERE SO JUST BE READY K COOL I WARNED Y'ALL. ALSO IT'S REALLY LONG OMFG.

A week had passed since Mike and Will started using their modulus equations to send codes to each other. Naturally, the gang had their own code that they would come up with each morning on the way to school. They'd change it every day to keep ahead of any potential prying math teachers, or clever students. They talked about everything from D&D, to arguments and debates about science, the cosmos, the girls Dustin and Lucas were interested in and what they were going to do after school. They'd make snarky comments about teachers and certain classes. Except in Mr. Clarke's class. They didn't

have to send notes around in science because they all sat next to each other. Mr. Clarke trusted them. Plus, they mostly all did their work in his class.

It was early morning and Mike Wheeler was regrettably up for school. He wasn't a morning person and had no problem letting everyone know about it. He stumbled out of bed in his boxer shorts, more-or-less tumbling to his wardrobe to retrieve something to wear at school today. He really didn't feel like going. It was Wednesday and that meant hump day. But he had something he had to do first. Something that had been bugging him all week.

Mike had a note he pocketed from Will on his bedside table. He kept it under his alarm clock so that nobody else would see it. It had numbers in neat calligraphy across the top of the paper, clearly Will's writing. Below it, Mike had translated the cipher into plaintext, recording the message in his own, printed handwriting. It read:

You're the best thing that's ever happened to this lonely soul, Michael Wheeler.

It took Will over an hour to write out the numbers for each of those words and he made sure to use large and small ones together. He clearly didn't want anyone else deciphering this message. When it happened on Tuesday, Mike went and hugged Will. He seemed nervous, as though expecting some sort of rejection. Mike can remember clearly that Will was literally trembling and noticeably relieved when he got the hug he so desperately seemed to need.

Sure, Will liked to play up the dramatics every now and then because of who he was as a person. It was one of his eccentric traits that made him a perfect match for the gang. But this wasn't eccentric. This was deep. Loving. Caring. Genuine. It made Mike feel warm and fuzzy inside, as though he just wanted to be around Will. He didn't know why, he just did.

The morning came around and he couldn't manage the confusion anymore. He finished his breakfast and raced up to Nancy's room. He knew she had a free in the morning, so she'd only be getting up around now - probably to study earlier. He couldn't think of anyone else to talk to. He felt like he had feelings for Will but he wasn't sure

anymore. He had to ask someone and Nancy was the only one who might understand.

He knocked on the white wood of her door. The knocks sounded as loud as gunshots. They reverberated through his body, like the pounding of a drum kit. What was he, Mike Wheeler, about to admit to his sister? What was he going to say? What, that he had feelings for his best friend? That he'd *rather* be with his best friend than a girl – than *any* girl? He hadn't thought this through. There were too many possibilities, too many unknowns here. What would Nancy say? What would she think? Mike was starting to freak out a little. He had a blank expression on his face, he was starting to go pale. He was just about to turn away from the door when it opened with an aggressive yank.

'What?' Nancy was *not* happy about the morning having arrived.

Mike's response was the instinctive reactionary approach of a fourteen year old, little brother.

'Nothing, whatever.'

Nancy slammed the door shut with an archetypal late-teens grunt.

But Mike couldn't let it go. He needed answers and he was convinced Nancy could give them to him.

He leaned up against her door.

'Nance, I'm sorry.' He never called her Nance but he'd heard Barbra, Nancy's best friend, say it once. He figured it might skew the odds in his favour.

Nancy grunted from the other side of the door.

'Whatever, come in, Mike.'

Mike did as she said and shut the door behind him. He was trembling. He could barely contain himself. He was shaking, more anxious than he'd ever been. But Mike Wheeler was brave. Mike Wheeler was the dungeon master. Mike Wheeler was the guy who would push someone over if they took a dig at someone he cared

about, even if they weren't there. Mike Wheeler would pick a fight, not to feel powerful, but because he believed it was right. Mike Wheeler would protect those he cared about more than any other person on the planet would. But Mike didn't know this at the time. All he knew was that he needed answers. He needed clarity. Because he always had clarity, until Will had started hugging him. There hadn't been any clarity since then.

'This had better be good,' said Nancy, organising her notes, giving Mike almost no attention at all.

Mike took in a deep breath.

This is what fear feels like, Michael. Be brave. Be strong. Be the man Will would want to be with. Mike nearly squinted at that last thought, but instead, all he could manage was a firm, six-word declaration, pushed unwillingly into the open space between his sister and himself.

'I think I might be gay.'

Nancy dropped her A.P. Biology notes in complete and utter shock.

Oh fuck, Mike thought. She's not okay with this. God no, what have I done? Will this expose Will? People already call him horrible things. I won't be able to live with mys—

'What did you say?' Nancy's gaze could have cut through titanium.

'I uhh, never mind, it's fine.' Mike was uneasy. He'd never felt uncomfortable around his sister before, not like this. He felt like she'd hurt him, like she might do something.

'You said you think you might be gay, right?'

'No!' Mike was starting to leave the room.

'Don't lie, Michael.'

'I'm not lying.'

'Oh, that is such *bullshit*. You know what you said.' Nancy seemed angry.

Mike's nerves grew exponentially. He could only imagine being kicked out of the house, having to live on the street. He regretted everything he'd done.

'Sit.' Nancy's one-word instruction drew Mike's attention back to her. She was once again re-organising her notes.

'Just because I might or might not be gay doesn't change anything,' Mike was stone-cold serious.

Nancy studied Mike's facial expression with scientific dexterity. She saw he was worried. He was really, really worried. He had the best puppy dog eyes he could muster.

'Oh, Michael. Those puppy dog eyes don't work on me. You and I both know this changes everything.'

Mike jerked away from her and stood up, defensively.

'How does this change shit? I am *still* Mike Wheeler. I am still the guy who rides his bike, the guy who plays D&D with his friends. I'm *still* the guy who gets teased. I'm *still* the guy who goes and sees midnight releases of scary movies with my friends. I'm still *everything* I was before. Okay?'

Nancy was just shocked. She sat there, calmly, waiting for him to continue.

Mike's expression went from defensive to numb in less than a millisecond.

'I... I am... right?' He was starting to tear up. He was caught between every powerful emotion he'd ever felt. It was as though time and space were ripping around him. He could barely get the words out.

'I am... I am still everything I was before, right? Please, tell me nothing's changed. I don't want to change, I just want- I just want to be me again.' At this point, he was pleading. 'Please tell me you still love me, *please*,' he managed to squeak out, before burying his face in his hands.

Mike Wheeler cried more than he'd ever cried before. He'd never

really considered himself as someone who cried a lot. He'd always thought *he* was the one who cried the least, especially when compared to Will. Not that he thought crying was wrong or bad, or in any way weak, it just wasn't his M.O..

Nancy hugged her brother, tightly. For the first time, it occurred to her that she was no longer talking to her little baby brother. She was talking to a young man, with emotions, with feelings, with concerns, with things he cared about, with *people* he cared about.

Nancy sat Mike down and grabbed some tissues out of her schoolbag. Through the remnant tears, Mike slyly mentioned 'You carry tissues in your schoolbag? Why?'

She looked at her brother with a gnawing grin.

'Because boys make us crazy,' she said, dismissively.

He let out a sharp giggle through his fading tears. Nancy grabbed a bunch of tissues and dabbed the tears off his face. Mike seemed genuinely surprised at the level of love and affection she gave him. The only person who'd really nurtured him like this before was his mom and well... Will?

She sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulder. He slumped towards her, both figuratively and literally leaning into her for comfort.

'Who is he?'

'Who is who?'

Nancy looked at him as though he was an adorable puppy.

'Mike, you wouldn't have come in and said what you just said unless you really cared about someone. And given you didn't come in and ask what kinds of things girls like to get in their lockers, we both know there's a boy on your radar.'

Mike swallowed. He didn't want to lie to his sister. She was his sister, after all.

‘It’s Will.’

Nancy’s jaw dropped.

‘You know, Will Byers. *MY BEST FRIEND.*’

Nancy grimaced momentarily. ‘I know who he is, dumb-ass. He’s way too nice for you,’ she smiled as she nudged his shoulder. She sat down next to him.

‘Awww, my little brother has a crush. On a boy, no less!’

Mike looked down at the floor and smiled. He felt like he was getting somewhere – that his sister wouldn’t hate him, afterall.

‘Feel better?’

Mike just nodded.

‘Good,’ Nancy said sharply, as she hit him, harder than she thought she did.

‘OW! What was that for?’

‘Don’t you *ever* question if I love you *ever* again, okay?’

He looked at her sincerely, his eyes widening and his expression pleading.

‘It’s just you said that things would change.’

‘Michael, you’re *growing up*! Of course things are going to change. You’re trying to work out who you are, what you think and what you feel. And it’s all happening so fast for you. I had a hunch that you liked Will for a while and to be honest, I think a part of you has known too. You might not have wanted to admit it or maybe you didn’t know how to express it. But now that he’s started hugging you, you can’t ignore it. It’s brought it up.’

Mike just stared at her, astounded.

‘How do you know all this?’

‘Well I saw you hug him the other day, so yeah.’

‘No, no. I mean how do you know all of *that*. The growing up crap.’

She kissed him on his head.

‘Take a breath and count to ten, sweetheart. This is life before you know who you really are.’

Mike looked at her, contorting his facial expression, as if waiting for her to continue.

‘It never gets easier. You just get a little older, a little smarter and a little wiser. You get better at dealing with life head-on. But no, it never gets easier. But God-damn, it’s worth it.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘How can you ask that?’ She said, genuinely surprised. ‘You have *someone*, someone you care about, who cares about you.’

‘You don’t know that Will cares about me like I care about him.’

Nancy laughed really loudly. (In hindsight, it was probably obnoxious, but oh well. What are siblings for?)

‘Of course you’re the last to know, Michael.’

‘What?’

‘Will Byers has had a crush on you since he was eleven years old.’

Mike’s jaw dropped.

‘How do you know?’

‘Mike *everyone* knows! Of course he hasn’t told us but even mom and Joyce have talked about it.’

Mike felt as though people hadn’t let him in on probably the biggest secret of his life so far. He was slightly annoyed.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that, then?’

‘Because this, this here. What happened this morning. That needed to happen. You needed to get it out. You needed to have that gut-wrenching feeling of nearly vomiting your insides up to tell me what you truly think and how you truly feel.’

‘Why?’

Nancy grinned.

‘Because now you’re ready to go and tell Will.’

Mike nearly died on the spot.

‘No!’

‘Yes!.’

Mike was weighing this up. If only Nancy knew, then it would be different. But his mom? Joyce, even? Did the gang know? Did Jonathan know? What if people found out? God, if he and Will started dating and Troy or his mindless disciples of Lucifer did something, that might be it. Mike might just wind up in prison. Because from this day forward, *nobody* was messing with Will Byers. And all at once, it hit him. He had to tell Will. Even if Will didn’t feel the same way, he had to tell Will. Because Will deserved to know.

‘What do I say to him,’ he asked Nancy, holding her gaze. Mike had switched to his attentive, leader-style brain.

‘Tell him the truth. Tell him how much you care. Let him know he’s your world. Show him how much he means to you. Surrender to him. Show him you’re brave enough to be vulnerable for him.’

Mike’s eyes narrowed.

‘You’re really good at this.’

‘I’m a girl, Mike. Oh, and by the way, I found out what a modulus equation is.’

Mike’s jaw dropped.

‘You seem surprised.’

‘Well, I mean, yeah!’

‘Sometimes you forget that you and I are, you know, related.’

But Mike was clearly worried and Nancy could see this.

‘Your secret is safe with me, you sneaky math nerd.’

Mike smiled, grabbed his school bag and kissed his sister on the cheek, something he made a habit of *not* doing. Even Nancy was surprised by the affection. He gave her a small embrace.

‘Good luck with the biology test!’

Nancy did a double-take.

‘How do you know about my biology test?’

‘Uhh, because it’s important and I listen to the things you say.’

Nancy was genuinely feeling loved. She couldn’t believe her asshole of a little brother was really a sweetheart in disguise this whole time. *Will was a lucky man*, she couldn’t help but think.

‘Thanks, Mike.’

‘Hey, I said I listened, I didn’t say I cared.’ He winked at her.

‘Mike.’

‘Yeah, sis.’

‘Piss off.’

Mike winked at his sister and started to close the door.

‘And Mike,’ he leaned back through the gap as Nancy spoke sternly into her biology notebook. ‘Be careful. He loves you. Don’t toy with him, okay? Make sure you’re sure before you use the L word.’

‘O-okay. Uhh, bye!’ He shut the door, with a fair bit of force.

His brain was confounded again, as though he was drunk with emotion.

WILL BYERS *LOVED* HIM?

He could barely believe it. Naturally, she was exaggerating.

Mike checked his schoolbag, mounted his bike and headed for the Byers household.

‘You know, rather than stressing over it every morning, you could just tell him,’ Jonathan said, while attempting to flip an egg.

‘But what if it ruins *everything*,’ replied Will, desperately.

‘It won’t,’ retorted Jonathan.

‘How do you know?’ Will seemed desperate, almost as if trying to convince himself that he didn’t have to tell Mike.

Jonathan had finally finished cooking Will’s breakfast and he managed to present the bacon and eggs in a manner that he thought was acceptable. He sat down next to Will.

‘You know why I like photography, don’t you?’

‘You told me it was because you can capture a moment that tells a thousand words.’

‘Exactly. And once you take enough photos, you start to see life as a bunch of pictures. You start to see people through the lens of a camera.’

Will looked at his brother, slightly puzzled.

‘What I’m trying to say is that if I took a photo of Mike every time he saw you, you wouldn’t be so worried about telling him.’

‘Oh yeah, why’s that?’ Will knew what his brother would say, right now he just needed the extra confidence.

‘Because Mike Wheeler’s expression only tells one word, not a thousand.’

‘What word is that?’

Jonathan smiled at him, ruffled his hair and got up to start cooking Joyce’s breakfast.

‘You work it out, kiddo. You’re the smart one of the two of us.’

It had been about a week since Will had first encountered the Man on Mirkwood. His picture had been quite haunting, a hooded figure in the night, wielding a dagger. Dustin joked that it might have looked like the cover of a the newest Stephen King novel, or a new horror film. Ultimately, nobody seemed to take Will too seriously over this. They all knew that he had the capacity to dream up the most ghastly imaginings, more-often-than-not doing himself a disservice.

But Mike knew this was different. Will seemed *genuinely* upset. But he didn’t bring it up again, so Mike just let it go.

‘Jonathan, what if he hates me?’ The thought of telling Mike how he’d felt since he was eleven years old struck daggers into his heart.

‘He won’t hate you. He’s your best friend. He’s not the kind of person who would do that.’

‘How do *you* know?’

What Jonathan wanted to say, he couldn’t say. He knew that Mike liked Will. There’s no way there could be any doubts about it. Really, nobody doubted it. But Will had to learn this for himself.

He sat himself down again after he’d plated up Joyce’s breakfast. She was still in the shower, so he put it under the window sill so the morning sun would keep it warm.

‘Will, if you’re really this nervous, you could just show him.’

‘What do you mean, *show* him?’

‘You’ve drawn about a thousand pictures of him. Go and get one of them and show him. I think you’ve always been better at drawing how you feel than telling anyone.’

Will looked at him curiously. ‘Really?’

Jonathan admired his little brother’s ability to read others exceptionally well in contrast to his own obliviousness to himself.

‘Remember when mom asked you what was wrong, after you’d been bullied, and you drew her a picture.’

Will remembered. It was horrible. In fourth grade, when Will was nine, a rude boy named Troy had picked on Will for being slow in the marathon. He said it must’ve been because Will was gay. At that age, Will didn’t even know what gay was and in fact, it was this insult that led him to question what it meant. Troy still picked on Will but he had a tougher skin now. Will couldn’t be affected by anything anymore. He knew all he had to do was focus on his studies and hopefully get to college. He wanted to be an animator so he wanted to study computers and fine arts. He definitely had the grades to get there, he just hoped his family could afford it. They already did so much for him, he didn’t want to ask for more.

This tangent ended when Jonathan pierced his train of thought.

‘Well?’

‘I remember,’ said Will, sombrely lowering his tone at the end of the phrase.

Jonathan put an arm around his brother. He knew that all he could see was Mike turning into one of those boys who picks on him. Or worse, that Mike would still be his friend but never comfortable around him. No more sleepovers. No more late-night chats. Jonathan felt *awful* for putting Will through this. He could just tell Will that Mike cared more for him than he could ever imagine and it would take away this pain and suffering. But Will had already lost enough. He wasn’t going to take away this experience because he knew

afterwards, Will would have so much more strength, courage and confidence.

‘Jonathan, what if he hates me?’

‘He won’t but even if he did, so what? You’ve dealt with bullies before.’ Jonathan came closer. ‘Will, your own father bullied you and you haven’t turned into some asshole. You’re a kind, caring, loving, sensitive, emotional person. You care for other people. You couldn’t so much as hurt a fly. Who was it that yelled at Lucas for eviscerating ants using a magnifying glass?’

Will cracked a half-grin. ‘Me.’

‘And do you know why?’

Will shook his head, ever-so slightly.

‘Because people are who they are, Will. And you are a good person. You are a loving person. You’ve realised early on that you don’t have to like normal stuff. You can like what you want. You don’t have to feel like people judge you. Stop caring about other people. If you like Mike Wheeler, and I know you do, God-damn tell him.’

Will stared at his brother.

‘Tell him this morning, when he comes over. Okay?’

Will looked at his brother.

‘Okay. I—I’ll show him,’ He promised, his voice trembling.

Joyce rushed out of the bathroom, dressed impeccably.

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I have to race to work, I am so late!’

‘It’s okay mom, here, take this.’ Jonathan handed her the breakfast he’d plated up for her. She put it into a travel plate she had ready to go.

‘Don’t worry about washing up, Jonathan, I’ll do that when I get home. You’re both so sweet, I love both of you, have good days!’

She kissed both of them on the cheek and raced out the door. Jonathan started washing up all of the plates.

‘Bye mom,’ they both said in unison.

Will eventually made his way to the shower and Jonathan left for work. He packed his school bag and folded an artwork he’d done of Mike and himself when he was eleven and first realised he was gay. He wanted to show Mike how he’d felt all this time. He just hoped it wouldn’t creep him out. Will was getting changed when Mike arrived. He answered the door, struggling to get his shirt on.

‘Hi Mike,’ Will managed, muffled under his shirt, trying to answer the door at the same time.

‘Will?’ Mike was confused. Was he seriously not managing to put on a shirt?

‘Yeah, it’s me, can you help.’

Mike chuckled.

‘Mike, *SERIOUSLY*.’

This did a lot to ease Mike’s nerves about the whole *feelings for your best friend* situation.

Mike pulled down a sleeve and the bottom of the shirt. The result was that Will’s head appeared out of the top and he jerked forward, collapsing into Mike’s chest.

‘Shit, sorry!’

Mike instinctively reached his arms around Will and constricted tightly.

‘Oh, ahh, hey Mike.’

‘Hey Will,’ he replied, not releasing Will from his grip.

Will wrapt his hands around his best friend’s back, hoping this moment would never end.

They'd been hugging for what felt like an eternity before Will slowly released. Mike freaked out and let go immediately, which led to a very awkward moment of unspeakable tension.

'I need to talk to you, Michael.'

'Ooh, sounds serious.'

Mike was doing everything he can to suppress his apprehension.

'Is it bad?' He asked.

'Ahh, well, uhh. I don't think—, it depends. I don't know. I don't think so. It's just, well, it is what it is.'

Mike looked at him, puzzled.

'Well, it just so happens that I have to talk to you too.'

'Really?'

Will's heart started beating faster. He felt like he was going to vomit.

'Maybe we can talk on the way to school. I kind of feel like walking today.'

'Alright, Michael. I'll walk with you. I'll sacrifice the morning bike ride for a walk,' said Will, doing his best to effect a happy tone.

'Hey, what's this "Michael" business? Only my mother calls me Michael.'

Will gave him a facetious slap on the arm.

'Get used to it Mikey.'

Mike grabbed his arm.

'William,' he said.

'Michael,' Will replied.

'This is weird,' Mike said.

‘Really? I think it’s funny.’ Will teased, chuckling slightly.

‘How so?’

‘Well,’ Will explained, ‘You seem to think calling me “William” is going to annoy me. It doesn’t. I actually think it’s kind of cute.’

‘Oh, is that so?’ Mike tried his best to look cheeky but a sigh of relief flashed across his features, something that Will picked up.

‘Well, William, what if I think you calling me “Michael” is cute too.’

‘Then I guess we’ll just have to be Michael and William.’

‘I mean, you call me Mikey, I could call you Willy.’

Will slapped him on the arm, quite hard, actually.

‘No.’

‘No?’ (Mike couldn’t help but chuckle.)

‘No.’

‘Alright, William it is.’

They began their walk, strolling down Mirkwood. They talked about everything from names, to cryptography, to the new D&D campaign. But this was small talk. They were both trying to work up the confidence to say what they knew needed to be said. They just couldn’t find the courage to do it. The walk was filled with pleasant hand brushes. Will found every excuse to nuzzle his face into Mike’s arm and Mike found every excuse to wrap his arm around Will’s shoulders.

To them, it felt like a natural, normal conversation between two friends who were trying to work out who they were. To anyone who might have been watching, this was two young middle schoolers who were so blindly in love, they couldn’t even see the road in front of them.

Everything was going peachy. They were talking about perfect dates -

Will said he'd like to do a picnic and see a movie, Mike said a trip to NASA and a nice dinner out. *Great*, Will thought. *How in God's name am I going to get us to Houston?*

Something grabbed Will's attention. It was a piece of paper attached to a tree, blowing in the morning wind. It looked as though it had been literally stapled onto the bark.

The two boys walked up to examine it. Will walked ahead, with Mike following closely. When Will read what the sign read, he nearly started to cry.

"KILL THE FAGS" it read, in unmistakable, bold writing. Will started to tear up. *I am strong*, he repeated to himself in his head. *Be strong, damn it!* He repeated internally until he saw Mike's face. He looked so worried, so upset and so mortified that a person would say something like this about anyone.

And in one moment, Mike knew. Mike knew that Will knew, and Will knew that Mike knew. An entire world collapsed around the two of them. Will's tears came to a rest when his focus turned to studying his best friend's face. He didn't look hateful. He didn't look angry. He didn't look resentful. He looked... he looked like he just wanted to hug him.

It took about two seconds of pause. Mike wrapped his arms around Will in a way that he'd never done before. There were cautious hugs, the kind that you do when you're testing how much someone cares. You don't want to hug them too much out of fear of them freaking out, so you're gentle.

And then there's the kind of hug that has the force of love behind it. Mike was convinced that's what this was.

'It's sick, Will. Ignore it. It's messed up. It's unnatural.' Mike's whispers made Will feel a little better.

Mike remembered what Nancy did this morning when he was feeling upset. He took off his shirt, revealing his singlet. Will was momentarily confused, although he was certainly old enough to appreciate Mike's physique.

But Mike used the bottom of his shirt to start dabbing Will's eyes and face. Slowly, he stopped crying. Mike put his shirt back on.

'I got your shirt wet,' Will said, reservedly and quietly, as they started to walk again.

'It's fine, don't worry about it.' Mike smiled at Will, whose face was recolouring.

Mike looked back at the sign on the tree. He looked at Will.

'Wait here,' he said. He ran back to the sign and tore it off the tree with as much testosterone-fuelled rage as any fourteen-year-old could reasonably muster. He tore it into as many pieces as he could and tossed them across the road, watching them blow away in the wind, like driftwood in a hurricane.

He walked back over to Will and stood close enough to him to brush his hand with each step. Will was nudging closer to Mike and Mike was nudging closer to Will. They both felt so close to each other, yet there was so much space between them.

As they arrived at school, Will still looked kind of red-faced. Mike pulled him into some bushes away from sight and got some water out of his bag. He wet his hand and rubbed the cold water on Will's face.

'Chin up, buddy. You can do this.'

Will nodded, as Mike's cool hands calmed his face.

'Oh,' Mike remembered. 'There was something you wanted to talk to me about.'

Will froze. He couldn't do that right now. After that sign. After his reaction. After how sweet Mike had been. Even though he was sure he knew that Mike knew, that he knew, he didn't want to blow it. He wanted to delay as much as possible because the affection from Mike was all he needed right now.

'Can we talk on break?'

Mike smiled. 'Sure. I have some stuff I need to tell you, too.'

Mike felt a lot better about what he had to tell Will. He felt that despite all the horrible things they encountered, Will trusted him. He thought it was very unlikely that Will could *ever* hate him. Mike knew that Will was gay. Definitely. There were no questions after that reaction. *Just because he's gay doesn't mean he's mine*, Mike reminded himself.

First period came around and Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas were all in the same class. It was Mr. Roxton's math class. Because they were doing a lot of classes today in maths and science, they decided a non-mathematical code would be the smartest between them. It was quite simple, all they had to do was add 'le' into random parts of the phrase and it would be unrecognisable. For example:

Ile Filend Tlehe Mleissileng pileecele laleteler letleoledleay.

They knew it wasn't genius but they also knew that most maths teachers wouldn't pick that up and their classmates certainly wouldn't either. Naturally, Mike and Will still had their modulus function key.

But Mr. Roxton was very clear about no notes in his class. Dustin and Mike sat together, while Lucas sat on the other side of the room and Will was on the other. Dustin and Mike were Roxton's favourites because they always did so well, so when they talked he didn't mind so much.

Mike thought a good time to tell Dustin of his plans was in math for two reasons: one, if he was disgusted, he couldn't just up and leave. Two, it meant Mike could explain quietly.

'Hey Dustin,' Mike asked, somewhat apprehensively.

'Yo,' Dustin asked, staring down at his pre-calc equation.

'I want to talk to you.'

'Uh-huh.'

'It's important.'

'Yeah, go ahead.' He still wasn't looking at Mike. Irritated, Mike

nudged him over to look at the question that seemed to be occupying his mind.

The question read, *A linear curve passes through (6, 4) and (12, 8). Determine the equation of the line in slope-intercept form.*

Mike grabbed his pencil and wrote on a separate piece of paper.

$y = mx + b$ where $m = \text{gradient}$.

gradient = change in y / change in x , so $8-4$ over $12-6 = 4$ over 6 , equals $4/6$. $M = 4/6$.

Hence, $y = (4/6)x + b$. Insert values (12,8).

Where $y=8$ and $x = 12 \rightarrow 8 = (4/6)12 + b$. $4/6(12) = 8$, so to make the equation true, $b = 0$.

Mike drew in large handwriting, **Therefore, $y = (4/6)x + 0$ for all x , y ; the y -intercept is $y = 0$.**

Dustin looked at Mike, annoyed. Mike knew that Dustin liked to work through the questions himself but this was important.

‘What can I do for you, *Mike*?’

‘Sorry, it’s just, it’s important. It’s about Will.’

Dustin hardened.

‘What about him?’

‘I uhh, I... I don’t know how to say this.’

‘C’mon, spit it out, Mike. It’s me.’

‘I like him.’

Dustin looked at Mike, incredulous.

‘Yeah, we all do, he’s our friend.’

‘What? No, no. Dustin. I *like* him.’

‘Oh. You do? Oh. Okay.’

Mike looked at Dustin. He contorted his face as Dustin continued studying Mike’s solution to his linear equation problem.

‘Are you understanding what I mean?’

‘Yeah, you like Will the same way I like Debbie Gorren.’

‘Wait, what?’

Dustin looked up.

‘Ahh, shit, never-mind.’

‘You like Debbie?’

‘Mike, don’t tell anyone.’

Mike raised his hands, as though surrendering.

‘I won’t, I won’t. Your secret is safe with me.’

‘Thanks.’

Dustin looked back down at his work. Mike thought for a second and hit his arm, playfully.

‘*DEBBIE*, really? Sorry, I just didn’t see it coming,’ Mike said, laughing.

‘Why not?’ Dustin said, annoyed.

‘She’s pretty, she’s funny and to top it all off, she *doesn’t* tease me.’

Mike kind of felt bad for him. All he wanted was someone to care about him like he cared for Will. But he knew his day would come. One day there’d be someone out there, for his dear old friend Dustin.

‘So, are you going to tell him?’

‘Who, Will?’

‘No, Jesus Christ, Mike. Of *course* Will.’

Deflecting Dustin’s sarcasm, Mike declared ‘I think he might already know.’

Dustin hit him on the back, as if to say “idiot”.

‘Your general oblivious gives me the shits, Wheeler. If you think that kid knows how you feel about him, you’re dumber than I thought you were.’

Mike looked at him blankly.

‘I literally *just* solved your equation.’

‘Yeah, you can solve equations but you can’t tell that Will Byers has been madly in love with you since the fifth grade. Genius, right?’

Mike’s brain was spinning out of control, like a discovered Soviet spy plane over Nevada.

‘How do you—‘

‘Oh come on Mike, I don’t *know* but I know.’

‘You knew. You knew all this time?’

Dustin nodded, sombrely.

‘Don’t be mad. I just, I didn’t want to intrude. In case I was wrong.’

‘Dustin, I—‘

‘Tell him, Mike. Tell him everything. You’ll make his God-damn life.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re the one source of love he’s had outside of home. Will is the kind of person who cares deeply about everyone. He cares for all of us more than you or I could ever imagine because of the way that he’s wired. He’s just naturally *inclined* to care more than a normal person. His feelings are exponentially multiplied. So imagine how he feels about you.’

Mike was trying to process all of this information, like a surfer facing a tidal wave. He felt so overwhelmed. But, this was Michael Wheeler, who had the composure of Nixon through the Watergate scandal.

‘So you’ll think he’ll be okay?’

‘I think he’ll kiss you,’ Dustin said, monotonously, as though it were not of any interest whatsoever.

‘But I just—‘

‘For God’s sake Wheeler, stop overthinking this and help me with my math. You can talk all you want through Mrs. Adams’ class.

And just like that, Mike explained linear equations to Dustin for the remaining twenty minutes of class.

En-route to Mrs. Adams English class, a chore the boys all dreaded, Mike had caught up to Will and the gang were walking side by side. They were talking about their upcoming math test.

‘Guys it’s fine, we can just get Mike to explain everything to us,’ Will pointed out.

‘Yeah! He rocks at linear equations,’ Dustin piled on.

‘Then it’s settled,’ said Lucas. ‘Mike is gonna save our asses for this pre-calc test.’

Mike pretended to look indignant but he liked helping his friends with math. Or was it that he liked to know he was smarter than them, in a fun-loving, competitive-teenager type of way? Half-and-half, he decided.

Not far before Mrs. Adams’ class, Will was pushed to the floor in a dramatic fashion to which he and the gang were unfortunately accustomed. Mike, Dustin and Lucas all had an internal red alert activate, as they turned to see Will’s assailant.

It wasn’t Troy. It wasn’t anyone they knew, in fact. The attacker was tall (definitely close, if not already 6-foot), with jet black hair and darting black eyes. He wore black jeans and a dark black T-shirt. He

spoke with a deep, raspy groan.

‘Watch where you’re going! Heard you’re the school faggot. Guess you belong on the floor.’ The words bounced right off Will’s skin, who was desperately trying to recover his books from the fall.

But not Mike. Mike Wheeler was galvanised by his newfound hatred for homophobic comments and at the same time, his newly admitted feelings for Will Byers. He promised himself this morning after he spoke to Nancy that *nobody* would pick on Will Byers and get away with it.

‘Hey. Hey!’ He yelled. The darkly dressed figure turned his attention and Mike felt a pang of regret and fear.

‘You want someone to pick on,’ Mike trembled, stepping back. ‘Pick on someone your own size.’

This unknown assailant smiled sadistically and came barraging towards Mike. He grabbed Mike’s neck and slammed him up against the locker. Will had gotten to his feet and couldn’t see over the crowd. Dustin and Lucas were catatonic, feeling helpless to protect their best friend. However, both of them managed to put Will between them, thinking some other bully might try to take advantage of the situation to hurt Will even more.

Mike’s head slammed against the lockers with the force of a car hitting a solid, concrete barrier after flying off an interstate. The sudden collision shocked Mike and he felt dizzy. The room was moving up and down as his brain tried to re-adjust to reality. But he didn’t cry. He didn’t complain. *Show no weakness*, he told himself.

‘You want me to pick on someone my own size, little man? How about I pick on you, you disgusting fag lover.’

Mike was frozen still.

‘Got something to say?’

Mike’s brain told him to be logical. *You aren’t going to win this fight. Get out of it. Get out of this situation. Don’t make a fool of yourself. Don’t make a fool of yourself in front of Will.*

‘No.’

‘What?’

Mike cleared his throat, feeling the large hand constricting around his neck. He struggled for air for the longest second of his life.

‘I said, *no*.’

The assailant released Mike, who reached back onto the lockers to try to stop himself from falling over.

‘Cross me again,’ the assailant said, pausing and holding Mike’s gaze.

‘And I’ll kill you. I mean it.’

The crowd dissipated almost as quickly as it had formed. The assailant disappeared within the crowd, seamlessly disappearing. Dustin and Lucas ran over to Mike, with Will in tow, checking if he was okay.

‘I’m fine, really, I’m okay,’ he tried to reassure them.

Dustin and Lucas saw the look on Will’s face and that’s all it took them to understand.

‘Hey, Dustin, we’d better get to English.’

‘Uhh, yeah, sure,’ Dustin replied.

Mike looked at Will’s pale cheeks, tear-filled eyes and vacant expression. It was as if all the happiness had been drained from him and he had gone into some sort of shock.

‘Will, I’m sor—’

Before he could continue, Will collapsed into hugging him.

‘Never *ever* put yourself at risk for me again, Michael. Do you understand? *NEVER*.’

Will sounded almost angry, with tears uncontrollably running down his face. Mike had never seen him like that.

‘Will, I— I can’t. I can’t make that promise. I won’t make a promise I can’t keep. I just get so mad when people say things to you, or push you over. You did nothing wrong. He hurt you and you know how wrong that was.’

‘Michael, you don’t need to fight these people. You can let me handle these things myself. They escalate when you do things like that. I can handle the assault. I can’t handle watching you get hurt for me. Those bullies, they’re weak. All they’ve got is physical strength. They don’t know love. They don’t know friendship. They don’t know loyalty. They only know hatred. They only know power. That’s why they’re weak. They only know intolerance. Don’t sink to their level, Michael. Don’t. You’re better than them. You were made better. You are a fundamentally *better* person. Please, please, please never, ever get hurt for me again.’

Mike was tearing up.

‘I—, I promise, Will. I promise.’ Mike hugged Will more tightly than this morning. Except, this time, Will hugged him first and held on just as tight. Mike’s tears seeped down onto Will’s shoulders. When the hug ended, Mike cleared his eyes, slapped his face a bit and did his usual, male-teenager-toughen-up routine. Will knew Mike had made a promise he couldn’t keep but it was important to him that Mike knew how he felt. Will already knew Mike cared. He didn’t need a friend to beat up his enemies for him and, more than that, he didn’t need a friend beaten up on his accord.

But that wouldn’t stop Michael Wheeler from doing everything in his power to protect William Byers.

Mike and Will walked into Mrs. Adams’ class just on time. She scoffed at both of them but both Mike and Will were too emotional to care.

Once the class had settled, Mrs. Adams spoke up.

‘I want everyone to welcome a new student today. His name is Tony Farmeridge and he’s new to Hawkins.’

Sure enough, the black, imposing figure that had just hurt Will and threatened to kill Mike stood proudly.

'I'm sure *everyone* will be kind to this young man. He's a smart young fellow and we all think he'll fit in well at Hawkins.'

The gang exchanged disgusted looks with each other. They couldn't believe what they were seeing.

As Mrs. Adams wrote endless notes on the board, Mike doodled a coded note to Will. Dustin could see him calculating numbers in his head. He was scribbling them down onto a torn off piece of paper from his notebook. He finally finished, folded the paper and wrote "WtW" on the folded face, meaning "Will the Wise," Will's D&D avatar.

The note managed to get to Will, but too little, too late.

Mrs. Adams turned around just as Will caught the note. Mike had miscalculated, horribly.

'Mr. Byers, passing notes, are we?'

'Uhh, no ma'am, I mean, uhh...'

Troy and Tony started to nudge each other on the other side of the classroom. Will pocketed the note as quickly and subtly as possible.

Mike was *freaking out*. He didn't know what to do. He felt so powerless - he couldn't help but think this feeling was quickly becoming a recurring theme throughout the day.

'Stand up, Mr. Byers.'

Will stood, terrified. He was visibly shaking, as if he were standing naked in the snow.

'Show me the note.'

'I don't have a note, ma'am.'

She looked at him with nothing but contempt. Her eyes narrowed like those of a witch.

'Turn out your pockets, Byers.'

Will revealed the note.

‘Read it to the class. I think you can share your conversations with us all, don’t you?’

Will cleared his throat, still trembling.

‘Two dash one, dash four, dash one, slash—‘

‘What sort of *nonsense* is this?’

Mike couldn’t help but chuckle. She would be staring at a seemingly random assortment of numbers. *Eat cipher, Adams*, Mike thought.

Mrs. Adams shoved the note back into Will’s hands.

‘Throw it in the trash.’

‘W-what?’

‘Are you deaf, Byers? Put the note in the damn trash can.’

Will looked at Mike, mouthed “I’m sorry” and did as the teacher said. It was at that point she noticed the *other* pocket.

‘Byers, I said to turn out your pockets.’

‘I did ma’am. J-just like you asked.’

Will was destroyed inside. He felt like curling up into a ball and crying. Bullying had become a part of his daily life but he never had to deal with it like this. Everything seemed to be punching him in the gut today.

‘The *other* pocket, Byers.’

Will’s heart sank. He knew what was in the other pocket. The drawing he was going to show Mike. The drawing of Mike he drew when he was eleven, holding his hand. The drawing with both of their names tied together in a pink bow just under a detailed Valentine’s love heart. He had about ten seconds before Mrs. Adams would steal it. God knows what would happen then. Mike, Dustin and

Lucas all watched in muted horror. Troy and Tony couldn't stop giggling.

Trembling, with tears swimming down his face for the third time that day, he handed the carefully folded piece of paper to Mrs. Adams. She unraveled it and her jaw dropped.

'What kind of perverted crap is *this*? This is absolutely fowl!'

Will was starting to cry hysterically. He slowly started packing away his things, while his friends only grew in rage. Mrs. Adams showed the drawing to the class.

'This, young boys and girls, is why we go to church. So we don't end up being perverted little freaks like Byers, over here. My husband is the pastor here at Hawkins and he thinks that people like *this* are an abomination and belong in the lowest level of hell! They are a *perversion!*'

Troy, Tony and their band of mouthbreathers were killing themselves laughing.

Will had managed to pack his things away. He picked up his bag, walked passed Mrs. Adams and snatched the drawing from her. He grabbed the tissue box off her desk as he left.

Mrs. Adams was clearly slighted by this.

'Uncouth little freak. Just like his brother,' she mumbled, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

That was it. Something snapped in Mike's brain. A part of him he didn't know he had what was about to be unleashed inside him. He stood up with such force that his table fell over, with all of his pens and pencils falling onto the floor with a ***crash***.

'You,' Mike said commandingly to Mrs. Adams. She turned around.

'Something to say, Mr. Whee—'

'I wasn't *fucking* finished,' he said, aggressively.

The entire class stopped in time. Mrs. Monique Adams had never heard that word said by a student in her decades of teaching. She went pale.

‘You are a cold, undead, callous *fucking* cow. You just tortured someone that you are paid to protect and educate. And you did it because you *could*. There is nothing more messed up and more *evil* than that. You are a criminal. You are a fowl, evil creature. You *know* Will gets teased. You *all* know,’ Mike was now addressing the room generally.

‘You all stand by, thinking it’s okay. If it’s happening to Will, it’s not happening to you, right? You all think it’s an acceptable sacrifice - that Will Byers gets relentlessly teased every day because *it’s not fucking you*. Well guess what, one day it will be you. One day, somewhere, somehow, you’ll be the one backed into a corner, being attacked, being hurt, being beaten. You’ll be the helpless one. You’ll be the one they come for. And you know what? Nobody will stand up for you. You didn’t say anything when they went for others and now there’ll be nobody left when they come for you. So nobody will help you. If you watch something that you know is wrong and you let it go, you’re just as damn guilty! You all walk passed it every day. You see it. And you have the gall to say you’re not responsible? Give it a rest, you’re *all* responsible for this. What you don’t know is what Will does behind the scenes. He’s a caring person, something our *beloved* teacher wouldn’t understand. He’s the best person I know,’ he looked at Dustin and Lucas. ‘The best person that we know.’

‘And as for you,’ he looked back at Mrs. Adams.

‘I personally can’t wait until history proves you stupid. One day, people like Will will be accepted. People like Will—oh, fuck it—, people like Will *and I*, will be accepted. And people like you will be exposed for the disgusting, sub-human bigots that you are. You’ll be treated like the criminals you really are and you’ll rot in the bottom of a prison cell, where you belong. You don’t belong in a classroom. You belong in an electric chair, Adams.’

The entire room gasped. (Did Mike Wheeler really just say—)

‘Now, while all of you sit here looking like dumbfounded morons, I’m

going to go and see if he's okay.'

As Mike left the room, he reached into the trash can next to Mrs. Adams. Luckily, his note was the only thing in there so it wasn't covered by anything gross. Then, he walked passed Tony's desk. He remembered something he read in an anatomy textbook, that if you twist the arm back enough, it triggers a pain point that completely immobilises a person and if it goes back far enough, it breaks. Something to do with the way the arms bones work. He grabbed Tony's arm and pushed through Tony's extreme resistance. He twisted it with all his might and Tony winced.

'You can threaten me all you want. I really don't care. But if you come after Will Byers, you'll wish you were never born. And I *mean that*.'

He twisted his arm back further.

'Do I make myself clear,' he asked.

Tony nodded, submissively.

'Good.'

Mike left an entire room bamboozled. Mike Wheeler had single-handedly taken on the entire class *and* Mrs. Adams, more-or-less admitted to being gay *and* gone after Tony himself. But that was Mike's power. When he knew he was right, he could do anything he needed to to resolve an injustice. He was indiscriminately selfless and loving. But my God, did Michael Wheeler have a protective streak. Dustin and Lucas were impressed. They couldn't be more proud of their best friend. They chuckled when they saw Mrs. Adams in shock, handing out a Mission Youth brochure to Tony. *Another recruit*, they both thought. But nothing could compare to the way Mike commanded the classroom. He took everyone's attention and he did so with a righteous power that only comes from true belief and truly caring about someone. They just wished that Will could have seen it.

Mike had never been so angry, but so calculated and clear headed, in his entire life. The adrenaline rush had propelled him towards the boys restroom. He always knew that Will went there to cry, away from everyone.

Mike walked into the restroom and locked the outside door. He had worked out how to use the locking mechanism when they started middle school, the first time he found Will in tears. He heard Will sobbing as he got closer to the cubicle.

He knocked on the cubicle door.

‘Will, sweetie, it’s—it’s me. It’s Mike. Open up.’

The door burst open and Will embraced him in a hug, tears flowing down his face uncontrollably. His tears went all down Mike’s shirt but neither of them noticed.

‘You were so brave in there, Will. She dug in deep and you stood your ground. And I’m proud of you. We’re *all* proud of you.’

‘I... I ran out— I ran out crying,’ Will managed to spit out, through stifled tears.

‘Who wouldn’t? What she did to you in there, that was unforgivable. We all know what she said to you before.’

‘Calling me a useless faggot wasn’t anywhere near as bad as that. She said that to me privately. That—that was different.’ He was still trying hard to stop himself from crying, wiping tears with his hands. He walked over to the sink and threw water on his face.

‘Well, I hope what I said made some of those mouthbreathers change their minds.’

Will stopped.

‘What did you say?’

‘Oh, just that there’s no such thing as an innocent bystander. I also

told Mrs. Adams that she was disgusting. Oh, and I twisted Tony's arm.'

'You did *what!*' Will was alarmed.

'Shh, shh, relax. Relax. It's okay. You're going to be okay.'

Will pulled back and reached into his pocket. He pulled out the now-scrunched up piece of paper.

He handed it over to Mike, his hands trembling again. Mike grabbed his hands.

'Will.'

Will met his gaze, with his tear filled eyes. He conquered enough of his fear to quietly say, 'For you.'

Mike took the picture and opened it slowly. Seeing it up close made him feel all fuzzy inside.

'Will... Whe— when did you draw this?'

'When I was eleven.'

'Will, I—, I just—'

'Mike, if you don't feel the same way, I understand, just... just don't hate me.'

Mike looked at him, incredulous. 'Hate you? Are you serious?'

Mike hugged Will again. But it was a different kind of hug. He ran his fingers through Will's hair, down onto his neck.

'Nothing could make me hate you, William. Nothing.'

To Will *and* to Mike's shock, Mike kissed Will on the cheek. It felt instinctive. He didn't even think.

Will and Mike both went red. They stared at each other for a few seconds and chuckled, still holding each other.

‘We should go, lunch is about to start. But let’s just go to science.’

Last period, they had Mr. Clarke’s class. Mr. Clarke was always fond of the boys and had a soft spot for Will. Mike knew his class would be a safe space.

Mike hurried Will around the back of the school to subtly get to Mr. Clarke’s room. The door was open but the room was empty. They both went in, shut the door and sat down.

‘Don’t you think we should get Dustin and Lucas?’

Mike considered it for a moment.

‘Nah, Dustin will know that if I couldn’t find you, I’d come and get them both.’

Will considered the situation for a minute.

‘Dustin knows, doesn’t he. He’s always known.’

Mike nodded.

‘And he’s okay with it?’

‘Will, he told me to tell you.’

Will’s eyes widened. He thought for a minute.

‘And if Dustin knows...’

‘That means Lucas probably knows too,’ Mike confirmed.

Will looked at Mike hesitantly. He didn’t know what to think. He was so overcome by emotion that he could barely comprehend his own reality.

‘We all love you, Will. No matter what.’

Will started to cry again. Except this time, the tears were happy. He smiled widely, something that made Mike very happy to see. He held Mike’s hand, trembling, as they both ate their sandwiches.

Eventually, lunch came to an end. When class started, the gang made sure to ensconce Will between them. Mike and Lucas sat on either side of Will and Dustin sat next to Lucas. Nobody was going to ruin Will's favourite class (other than art). Mr. Clarke could see that Will had clearly been upset. When the lesson ended, he approached them.

'Is everything okay, boys?'

In unison, Lucas, Dustin and Mike all looked at Will.

'Uhh, yeah, fine, thanks, Mr. Clarke,' he said, feeling a little spotlighted.

Mr. Clarke had been teaching long enough to know a white lie when he saw one. He also knew Will Byers. He knew the torture he went through on a daily basis. But there was only so much one teacher could do. Naturally, most teachers at Hawkins Middle took the "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me" viewpoint. Being a man of science, Mr. Clarke knew this simply wasn't true. But he was alone in his understanding. He did his best to ensure Will was treated well in his class, although he knew that he was in the best hands possible amongst his three loyal friends. He couldn't help but think back to his childhood, wishing he had the same kind of science-loving, D&D playing, nerdy friends. The truth was that he understood Will's loneliness. But he also knew that it didn't last forever and as long as Will Byers survived high school, he'd be fine. And, most importantly, he knew that Mike, Dustin and Lucas wouldn't leave him behind, ever.

'Did you wanna use the AV room today?' Mr. Clarke rarely made unscheduled offers such as this.

Once again, the boys all looked at Will.

'Uhh, thanks but if it's okay, I'd just like to go home.'

'Of course, I understand.'

Lucas nearly suggested that Dustin and he walk home with Mike and Will but Dustin's gaze reminded him otherwise. Dustin had an incredible interpersonal insight, something that many teenagers his

age lack. His emotional intelligence was something that most adults would envy. And so it was that Mike and Will walked home again.

This time the chat was more what one would expect from two young boys who have come to realise that they *really, really like* each other. Mike had his arm protectively around Will, while Will's arm was wrapt around Mike's back. They talked about what they wanted to do after school. Mike wanted to look at an up-and-coming scientific field; he said it was called 'biomedical engineering'. It combines computer science, biochemistry, engineering and anatomy to create devices for the medical profession. He wanted to make people's lives better while still inventing things. He also wanted to do some writing and maybe one day, become the president. Will, on the other hand, wanted to study computer programming and fine arts. He longed to be an animator and video game designer. Eventually, he wanted to write his own comic books, with his own characters. All he really wanted was to do what he loved and earn enough money to save up, invest and provide for his family, as they had so diligently provided for him.

If reduced to single traits, Mike Wheeler was a leader and Will Byers was a carer. Together, they formed a unity unbounded by hatred, intolerance, greed or difficulty. They were like an un-splittable atom, smashed into existence by the sheer force of a collision between two unstable elements travelling at the speed of light.

When they walked down Mirkwood, Mike had his eyes peeled for any more signs. He found none, which made him very happy. For the first time in his life, he felt as though he could actually protect someone. For someone like Mike, who spent a lot of time trying to lead, trying to be fair, trying to do the right thing, this was powerful. And, if he were to be honest with himself, Mike took pride in being able to protect people he cared about. He felt as though his dad didn't do very much protecting and Will's dad certainly didn't. As far as he could see, it was now his responsibility to protect Will, as best he could. Dustin and Lucas would always be there but Will was different in Mike's view. Will was special. Will was the one.

Eventually, Mike and Will got back to the Byers household. Mike explained what had happened to Joyce and Jonathan that day because he knew Will wouldn't. Joyce hugged him and Jonathan

slapped his shoulder.

‘What you do for Will, man, we couldn’t do it without you.’ Jonathan seemed to so genuinely care for Mike that it often took him by surprise. The Byers family dynamic was so different from his own. He knew that his mom and dad cared about him, as did Nancy, because they were *family*. It was *fact*. They were always there when he needed them. But the Byers, they were different. Will knew his family cared about him because they told him so, every day. They would fight a war for Will. Nothing was going to stop them from protecting him.

Mike went to check on Will. As he was walking, Jonathan intercepted him in the hallway.

‘Hey, Mike, did Will talk to you?’

Mike looked at him, uncomprehendingly. It took him a second for a wave of recognition to shift his expression.

‘Oh, he, uhh, he gave me a picture.’

‘And?’ Jonathan was a little scared that he *may* have been wrong about his hunch.

Mike shuffled closer to Jonathan, knowing that Will may hear on the other side of his door.

Mike whispered, ever so softly.

‘And I’m trying to figure out the best place to take him on his first date.’

Jonathan looked at Mike for a few, priceless moments. He embraced him in a very big-brother-type way.

‘Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for everything.’

Mike was a little confused. He wasn’t entirely sure how to respond.

‘You mean the world to him, Mike. You really do. And what you do, the way you make him feel safe. Well, we couldn’t do it. It’s something only you could do.’

The hug ended and all Mike could think to say was 'He's safe with me, don't worry about it.'

Jonathan ruffled his hair and left to help Joyce with the dishes.

Knock, knock, knock.

'Come in,' Will called out.

'Oh, hey Mike!' Will looked outside.

'It's kinda late, are you staying the night?'

'No, no I'm not. Mom would kill me if I slept over here on a school night. I just wanted to come in and say goodnight.'

Will was sitting down at the desk in his room.

Mike walked up behind him, burying his face in Will's freshly washed hair and snaking his arms around his chest.

'Goodnight, trooper,' he said, kissing him on the head.

'Goodnight, Mikey,' Will replied, smiling broadly, rubbing his hand across Mike's cheek.'

'Oh, crap!' Mike suddenly remembered something.

'I uhh, I rescued the note I wanted you to read today. Don't worry, there was nothing else in the trash, so it's not dirty or anything. Just, uhh, here.'

Mike gave Will the note that had been the first domino to fall; the catalyst of the day's events.

'See you at school, William.'

'Sleep tight, Michael.'

Will saw Mike out to the door. He straddled his bike with the confidence that comes with being a teenager, whose most efficient transportation method is a bike. As Will noticed Mike's direction, a pang of fear struck him. *Mike is going down Mirkwood*, he thought.

This was around the time that Will had seen the hooded figure on the road. But nobody else had seen it, so Will dismissed it. He quite literally *ran* back into his bedroom, to decode Mike's note.

Mike's ride home was sombre and peaceful. He entered Mirkwood, thinking about Will and how much he cared. He was conscious of the trees on the road, even thinking about the man Will said he saw. Nothing. No sign of anything. The woods and the forrest were peaceful and quiet. Nonetheless, he didn't dawdle through Mirkwood.

Wait. He heard something. Was he making it up? No, no. He definitely heard something. It sounded like his name. No, no. He could make it out. *Get WHEELER*, a voice seemed to whisper.

'It's Wheeler!'

Mike's stomach dropped. He could hear the voices but he couldn't see anything. The forrest was dark and silent. The bright glow of Hawkins National Lab loomed on one side and the unknowns of the forest lay mysteriously in the dark, on the other.

'Get Wheeler, he can rot with the other one!'

Whose the other one? Will? *Did they get WILL?* How would that even be possible?

Mike's train of thought was interrupted by a noise. He could hear something that sounded like elastic stretching.

TWANG, he heard and then only milliseconds later, **WOOSH!** A pointed object roared passed his head and impaled a tree trunk on the other side of the road. It was an arrow. A really pointy arrow, fired from what he assumed to be a bow. Or a crossbow.

Finally, it registered. They were trying to hurt him. Kill him, even. Mike peddled faster and faster.

TWANG, **WOOSH**, another arrow flew past. The projectiles were getting closer and closer to his head.

TWANG, WOOSH. Another rebounded off the handlebar of his bike. Mike could see the end of the road coming up. It was about 50 metres in front of him and he knew on his bike, he could manage to do that in about 20 seconds. He had to survive for 20 seconds. He would have been about 15 metres from the end when it happened.

TWANG... WHOMP! Mike's bike spun out from under him, it collapsed completely. The arrow had hit the back wheel, bursting it entirely. His face grazed the asphalt and he had blood dripping from it. He had cuts on his arms and legs, bleeding everywhere.

'Get him! Get him *NOW!*'

Mike turned to see what was coming. The horror that greeted him was something he could barely comprehend.

Three hooded figures, all dressed in black, were seemingly hovering towards him. He was frozen.

One of them spoke.

'Kill him and put him with the other faggot!'

Mike came back to reality. He screamed, he ran and he ran. He dodged one more arrow that landed only inches away from his foot. He got to the end of Mirkwood and was too scared to look back. He kept running. When he finally got home, he banged on the front door like a mad man. He was in tears, he was crying, he was in so much pain.

An angry Karen Wheeler opened the door.

'Michael, where have you— OH MY GOD!'

Mike hugged his mother in a very child-like way, as though he needed to do so, to feel safe.

'What on earth happened?'

'Mom, the phone, I need to use the phone.'

'Who would you be calling, Mike?'

‘Mom! Let me use the phone and then you can ask all the questions you need to.’

Karen knew better than to argue with her determined son. She knew exactly which parent he got it from and it wasn’t Ted.

Mike dialled Will’s number fanatically. He couldn’t help but think Will was “*the other one*.”

Jonathan Byers answered the phone, with a very disgruntled and resentful ‘Hello?’

‘Jonathan, hi, it’s Mike. Is Will okay?’

‘What, Mike? Huh?’

‘Just tell me if he’s okay. Please. Just tell me.’

‘Mike, of course he’s okay, what are you talk—’

‘Oh for God’s sake just *check for me!*’

Jonathan could feel Mike bordering on a panic attack. He placed the receiver on top of the phone box and went and collected Will from his room, who was working hard to decode the note Mike had left only minutes before.

‘Mike?’ Will’s voice was like a cool shower on a sunburn to a hysterical Mike Wheeler.

‘Oh my God, thank *God* you’re okay.’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

Then it hit Mike. Will had no idea. There’s no way he would tell Will now, just before bed.

‘Uhh, no reason, I’m just going a little crazy I guess. Just, uhh, do me a favour, wait up for me in the morning, yeah?’

‘I always do, Mikey. Oh also, uhh, Jonathan wants to talk to you. Goodnight, Mike. Oh and also,’—Will made a kiss over the phone line

—‘forgot to kiss you back. Have a good sleep, Mike.’ Mike could *hear* Will smile over the phone.

Jonathan came back onto the phone.

‘Mike, I don’t know what you think you’re doing bu—‘

‘I saw them, Jonathan. I saw them. It. Whatever. I saw it.’

‘Mike, what are you talk—‘

‘The Man on Mirkwood, Jonathan. Except it’s *men*. I saw three tonight, probably more. And they tried to kill me. They got my bike. I’m hurt but I’m okay.’

Jonathan was terrified.

‘W—we should do something,’ he breathed, coldly.

‘Tomorrow, tomorrow we can. I’m safe now. I’ll be okay. Thanks Jonathan, goodnight.’

The line went dead. Jonathan, trembling, hung up the phone.

Karen Wheeler looked at Mike in a way she never had before. Mike studied her expression. Sad wasn’t the word, angry wasn’t the word. No. Karen Wheeler had just listened to Mike’s end of the conversation. For the first time in years, Mrs. Karen Wheeler was terrified beyond comprehension. She sat Mike down and tended to his wounds as he told her everything. Everything about the day, from the sign, to the note, to the picture, to Mrs. Adams, to the Men on Mirkwood. Everything. Karen was scared for her son. She really was. She was exceedingly proud of him for finally being honest with Will about his feelings and for standing up for him like he did but there’s no way in hell that she was going to let *anyone* hurt her son.

Mike went to bed but Karen stayed up all night. Nobody was getting to Mike. *Nobody*.

Will had finished decoding the note. He managed to write it out into coded form.

I/L-O-V-E/Y-O-U/W-I-L-L

Will corrected the grammar, finally converting it into plaintext.

I love you, Will.

Will's heart jumped like an acrobat on a tightrope. He couldn't stop grinning. *Jonathan was right*, he thought. Mike Wheeler cared for Will just as much as Will cared for him. But love? Really? Was Mike sure? Will was too tired and too emotionally exhausted to dwell on it. All his crazy brain could think was that Mike Wheeler loved him. He *loved* him. Not like, *love*. End of story.

Will smiled, believing that despite the horror the day brought him, it was unquestionably the best day of his life.

4. The First Date and the First Disappearance

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Will are beginning their relationship.

But something is happening in Hawkins. Something big.

THE CRYPTO KIDS

CHAPTER FOUR: THE FIRST DATE AND THE FIRST DISAPPEARANCE

NOTE: There may be some typos, I edited this *way* too early in the morning. Sorry!

TRIGGER WARNINGS: homophobia, homophobic bullying, violence, violent themes.

CONTENT WARNINGS: Thriller themes. Criminal themes.

READER DISCRETION ADVISED. MATURE AUDIENCES.

Will awoke suddenly, his eyes opening widely. Slowly, he adjusted, taking in the early morning darkness as the cool, winter air lashed his

exposed skin. He was panting, almost hyperventilating and he was sweating. It only took him a few seconds to recognise that he'd had another nightmare.

Slowly, he was able to recall the nightmare. He remembered Mike. And Tony. And Troy. And James. He remembered and he gasped. He'd found Mike dead in his locker. In his dream, Will had found Mike, cold and unmoving, in his locker. Troy, Tony and James had killed him for revenge, to get back at him for twisting Tony's arm.

Will started to well up. It was only just last night that Mike told Will he loved him. Will didn't know what to say. He'd always figured that this would never be a problem for him because if *anyone* was going to be premature with the L-word, it was certainly him. Not that Will ever expected anything to develop. For the first time in his life, Will Byers was in over his head, emotionally.

Will had had so many nightmares by this point that he had a self-care routine. First, he'd sneak into the kitchen and make himself a glass of milk. He'd quietly try to open the window in the kitchen, as the cool air helped lower his body temperature. Second, he'd go to the restroom and third, if he still couldn't get back to sleep, he'd draw. When Will walked into the kitchen, he noticed the time.

5:22AM

Will made his glass of milk but was too tired to open the window. He opted for taking his glass of milk outside to embrace the early morning chill.

The biting cold made Will feel better. He was always more comfortable in the cold, as opposed to the heat. As far as Will could tell, the cold meant you could put on cute sweaters and sweatpants, stay home and draw, read comic books or watch movies. Oh and it meant that he had an excuse to hug Mike Wheeler. There had been many sleep-overs in which Will cuddled up to Mike, saying that he was cold. Now that he knew how Mike felt, it made a bit more sense than just attributing it to the kindness of an overly-empathetic friend.

Will went back inside to the restroom but decided to come back out the front with his sketchbook. He figured that many gay teens didn't

get to experience falling in love with their best friend, who they assumed was straight for most of their life. For the first time ever, Will felt enraptured in a warmth that he felt like he couldn't describe. It was as though everywhere he went, he was being hugged. Will Byers was, by all measures of socioeconomics, not a person with material fortunes. But he felt that even the richest people in the world couldn't *possibly* be as lucky as he is. What most people would never understand is how special it is for someone who is gay to find their soulmate before they've even started high school.

Will would have been outside for about half an hour. He sat there, aimlessly doodling on his sketchbook. He looked at what he'd created. He was drawing the view from his front porch. He most enjoyed drawing the grass and the forrest. He enjoyed the attention to detail an artist needed to be able to do it. Will had always had an eye for detail. He always noticed the smallest features on Mike's face and after so long, he knew he could replicate it perfectly.

It would have been about 6AM that he heard something. A rustling in the bushes. In fact, he paid almost no attention to it. Living across the road from what is literally a gigantic forrest, that ensconced a secretive government *something*, Will and his family were used to animals scurrying about the place. Only when Will looked up, he saw two hooded figures moving toward him. He froze, as though paralysed by a supernatural force. Something inside him compelled him to stand.

'W-w-what d-do you want,' he managed to ask.

The lead figure moved the dagger in its hand so the dagger was now facing downwards, in a Hitchcock-shower-scene-style fashion.

Will dropped his sketchbook and ran inside. He woke up his whole family. He made all the noise that he could. He screamed, he threw a glass plate off the kitchen table, the ceramic smashing all over the floor. Joyce and Jonathan woke up immediately, with Jonathan out of bed the fastest.

'What! Will, Will, what's wrong?' Jonathan was genuinely terrified, his voice raising and projecting through the house.

'I-I-I saw them.'

'Them?'

'Jonathan, there's more. The Man on Mirkwood, there's another one. There were two. They came up to the front door.'

Jonathan hugged his brother.

'It's okay, it's okay, you're here now. We've got you.'

Joyce watched this entire thing with confusion.

'What's going on? What's this?'

'Mom, it's fine, I got it,' was all Jonathan could manage, with his terrified younger brother holding onto him for dear life.

'Is this about Will's dream,' Joyce asked, still trying to comprehend the entire situation.

'It's not a dream!' Will released from Jonathan's grip defensively.

'Mom, I wouldn't lie about this! Please, please believe me.'

The confused look on Joyce's face quickly materialised into sorrow and sympathy. She hugged her son.

'I believe you,' she said. She would have said it even if she didn't but the look on Jonathan's face absolutely terrified her. It was Jonathan who got the call from Mike Wheeler only hours before. It was Jonathan's face that cemented Joyce's fear.

Jonathan opened the door to get Will's sketchbook back. There was nobody to be found, not even a noise coming from the forrest.

It took Jonathan half an hour to convince Will to go back to his room and go to sleep. He said that if he found it hard to sleep, he could come into his room. But he wanted Will to try. If Will was honest with himself, he wanted Mike to be here. He always felt safe with Mike. He couldn't explain it, he just did.

Will got back into his room, shut the door, the window and pulled down the blinds. He put his sketchbook down on the table and opened up to his landscape drawing. When he turned the page, a most horrific sight greeted him.

In giant red crayon, in *Will's* giant red crayon, angry text had been scribbled all over his landscape drawing. It read:

1. **SHARPE**
2. **BYERS**
3. **WHEELER**

DEATH TO THE FAGS OF HAWKINS

Will was in so much shock. He felt light-headed, dizzy and all of a sudden, nothing. Darkness as empty as night, stillness as definite as death.

The phone rang in the Byers household at a reasonable time of 8AM.

‘Hello,’ Joyce answered the phone, groggy.

‘Hi, Joyce? Hi, it’s Karen. Wheeler. Mike’s mom.’

‘Oh, yeah, hi Karen. What can I do for you?’

‘Well, I mean, Mike’s staying home today. I don’t know if you’ve been told but uhh, yeah, well, he’s staying home and I thought Will might be too. I was just going to suggest that you could bring him over here if you wanted to. I know it’s hard, with you and Jonathan both working, and all.’

‘Umm, yeah, sure, thanks Karen. I’ll bring him over on my way to work. Thank you so much for this.’

‘Oh, not-to-worry! It’s no trouble at all. He’s a wonderful boy.’

‘He is, he really is.’ A tear rolled down Joyce’s face.

‘Alright, perfect, I’ll see you soon!’

‘Thanks Karen, goodbye.’

Joyce went to place the receiver back on its place on the wall. She was trembling and missed the groove a few times, before being able to hang the phone up. She looked at Jonathan, who was making breakfast, still shaking, as though cold.

‘Jonathan.’

He looked at her, comprehending immediately.

‘How in *God’s name* did Karen know that Will would stay home today?’

Jonathan never lied to his mother. He may not volunteer the truth at all times because as far as he was concerned, he needed to protect her from certain things. But if she asked, he always told.

‘Last night I got a call from Mike, who was chased by a group of what he could only call ‘hooded men’. They... they tried to kill him.’ Joyce raised a hand to cover her mouth.

‘Mike escaped but he’s bruised and was in a lot of pain last night.’

‘A-a-a-and you think these were the same people who came for Will this morning?’

Jonathan nodded.

‘How do you think Karen knew about Will, then?’

‘Mom, don’t you remember? Will drew the Man on Mirkwood?’

‘Wasn’t that a dream? He said he must’ve—‘

‘No, mom. That was real. That’s who came for him this morning. And that’s who came for Mike last night. I think Karen must’ve though I’d told you and you would keep Will home, now that he was right and

that meant he might be in danger.’

Joyce ran down the hallway into Will’s room. She saw that Will wasn’t in his bed.

‘WILL! WILL!’ She called out.

She moved to the other side of his bed and saw him lying on the floor, in a disfigured way.

‘Jonathan! Call 9–1–1!’

It didn’t take long for the ambulance to arrive but by then, Will had come-to. He’d simply fainted. The paramedic said that he most likely woke up but was so tired that he went back to sleep, although Will had no recollection of this whatsoever. He wasn’t in a lot of pain. His head hurt a bit but that was all. He insisted he didn’t need further attention.

He also soon remember why he fainted. He went back to his sketchbook, which he’d closed as soon as he’d woken up. He saw the text once again.

1. **SHARPE**
2. **BYERS**
3. **WHEELER**

DEATH TO THE FAGS OF HAWKINS

Sharpe. Will recognised that name. Jordan Sharpe. He was a student at Hawkins Middle who was bullied much the same way that Will was. Except, in Will’s opinion, Jordan was bullied more relentlessly than him. Will had three friends... Well, two friends and one potential boyfriend, who would defend him to the grave. Jordan had nobody. Will didn’t know much about his mother but Jordan’s father was a God-fearing door salesman. All he could remember was Jordan disliking him.

Will had always tried to talk to Jordan when he saw him. He always hugged him and he always got his friends to get on Jordan’s side. They liked Jordan a lot, even though there was a one year age gap. Dustin and Jordan were actually fairly close because of their work in

the drama group. In fact, Dustin said it had made Jordan feel a lot happier since he did the drama performance in the last school year. Will was thrilled to hear this because someone as sweet as Jordan deserved friends. Apparently, Jordan told Dustin he wanted to go the Juilliard School in New York after graduating. He wanted to perform on Broadway.

But Will noticed something about his name on the sketchbook. It was crossed out. What does that mean? He'd seen enough horror movies to have an immediate assumption but that stuff wasn't real. Nobody tried to kill anyone in Hawkins. That was Hollywood stuff.

What scared Will most of all was that Mike and Will's names were on it. Did this mean just them, or their families? It was only their last name. Will was terrified. He was shaking. He didn't want Mike to get hurt.

'I'm taking you to Mike's today,' Joyce said to Will, as he started packing his books.

'You've been through enough this past week, at school and out of school, so you can have a day off. Or a few. Mike's having the day off too.' Joyce did her best to smile but it was hard for her.

Will became much more elated after that. He put the sketchbook in his schoolbag in such a rush that it was still open on the landscape drawing, with the mysterious list.

Will had some breakfast. With the rush this morning, all they had time to make were some Eggos. Will didn't mind - who *didn't* love Eggos. He doused them with butter and ate them in the car on the way to Mike's.

'Mrs. Wheeler, I understand that you seem to think that what your son went through was serious but we have bigger problems here today!'

‘What could possibly be more *important* than a teenager nearly getting killed riding his bike home from his friend’s house?’

Karen was arguing with a policeman at her front door. She’d called Hawkins Police Department this morning and they’d sent Officer Thomas Jones. Jones was a Hawkins native and a very respected man. But right now, he seemed to be under the impression that Mike was making things up, or at the least, exaggerating. She looked at the clock in her living room. 9:25AM. She’d been waiting for him for nearly two hours.

‘Well, what could be more important?’

Karen’s question pierced Thomas’s train of thought. He moved closer to the door.

‘Look, Karen, I’m not meant to tell anyone this but we have a missing child on our hands. I don’t—, I’ve already said too much. When this mess clears up, I promise will come back and make a full statement.’

Karen Wheeler was infrequently lost for words but here she stood, confused and concerned. If one kid went missing and the police had no idea, what would stop other kids from disappearing?

‘Officer,’ she called out, just as he was leaving.

‘Who is it that’s missing,’ she continued, her voice pleading.

‘That Sharpe kid. Mother said she couldn’t find him this morning.’

‘Jordan? Jordan Sharpe?’

‘That’s the one. I’ve gotta go, Mrs. Wheeler. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you more.’

Karen raised her arms, apologetically.

Karen recognised that name. Jordan Sharpe. Mike had always talked about how bad he felt for him. About how he was alone and was always picked on for being a “fag”. Mike hated it and so did Karen.

Mike was sitting on the stairs, having heard the whole conversation

between Officer Jones and his mother. He sat with a fist pressed against his cheek, impressively creating the 'disaffected teenager' look, that he could so easily do.

'As if you can trust the police after Adams' son is working there.'

Karen walked up the stairs and sat cross-legged next to her son.

'Michael, you can't judge people because their parents are...'

She was lost for a noun that wouldn't cause offence.

'Mouthbreathers,' Mike filled in.

Karen looked at Mike and smiled. The smiles turned to chuckles, which turned to laughs.

Karen moved up the stairs to sit next to Mike.

'I invited Will over today. I knew he'd be home too, so I thought you two could spend the day together. It'd give Joyce a break too.'

'Thanks, mom.'

Mike was still in a lot of pain but he felt more loved than ever. If Will was creeped out by his note, he wouldn't have been so loving on the phone - he certainly wouldn't have kissed him over the phone. And he definitely wouldn't be coming over today.

'Hey mom.'

Karen looked at Mike.

'I know you knew.'

She smiled, playfully.

'Mike, anyone paying attention knew. I'm pretty sure Dustin knew before anyone else knew, though.'

'How do you know that Dustin knows?'

'He asked me about it once, if I was okay with it. Of course, I was.'

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Because I knew if you worked it out yourself, you’d be a romantic sweetheart, which is what Will wants. Life is about experiencing these things for yourself.’

Mike looked at her quizzically.

‘How do *you* know what Will wants?’

Karen laughed. ‘You think you’re all so different but when it comes to the heart, you’re all the same.’

Mike looked at her, somewhat scornful. Karen put an arm around her son.

‘Everyone likes a knight in shining armour, Michael. Will has been crushing on you for so long that you could tell him you hated him and he’d still beg you to love him. But Will’s not old enough to know, yet. He’s not old enough to know when someone likes him and because of what he’s been through, he assumes people don’t like him. Will thinks he’s unlikable. And that’s why he likes you so much.’

Mike still looked confused.

‘Michael, seriously?’

He shrugged.

‘He likes you because you have a way of making him feel loved. He likes you because you make him laugh. Because you’ve always protected him. He likes you because you’ve always been his number one fan with everything. It might be what you just call “being you” but to Will Byers, that’s a miracle. You’re his miracle.’

Michael teared up a little bit but did the classic teenager routine and wiped his face on his sweater, so he wouldn’t look emotional. Naturally, it didn’t fool Karen.

Mike was always amazed at his mother’s capacity for momentary but frequent eloquence. As far as he was concerned, she was the smarter parent. He couldn’t understand why his dad got to go to work when

his mother was clearly more intelligent. *Just because he's a man doesn't mean he's better at working than mom*, he remembers thinking from a young age. He could never understand it.

Mike rested his head against his mom's shoulder.

'Love you, mom.'

'Love you too, Michael.'

Finally, Will arrived. Will ran up to the Wheeler's front door, resisting the urge to incessantly ring the doorbell (*That's rude*, he thought). Karen answered the door.

'Hi Will!'

'Hi Mrs. Wheeler, may I come in?'

'Sure!'

Karen stepped out of the way, smiling. *Perhaps he can teach Mike some of those manners*, she couldn't help but think.

Karen and Joyce spoke for some time. Karen mentioned the missing child and Joyce mentioned the Men on Mirkwood. Joyce had remembered Jordan because every year, Will made him a birthday card. He didn't have any friends, so he never celebrated his birthday at school. But Will always made sure he received a card.

Mike dragged Will into the basement.

'Jesus, Mike, what happened to you?'

Mike looked better than he did last night. He'd put new bandages on his wounds and had a shower. He looked presentable but still damaged enough that Will felt he needed to help.

Mike and Will sat down on the couch. The two boys were facing each other. Will had crossed his legs, to totally face Mike and Mike was

facing Will, with his legs off the side of the couch. Mike grabbed both of Will's hands.

'I have to tell you something and I don't want you to freak out.'

Will looked visibly nervous.

'Last night, I, uhh.'

Mike realised that however he put this, it would terrify Will. He didn't know what to say. On one hand, he wanted to tell him the truth but on the other hand, he wanted Will to feel safe.

'I fell off my bike!'

Will looked surprised. A silence fell between them.

'Yeah, I was going down Mirkwood and I snagged my bike on a pothole. Went flying, actually. It was pretty bad. It hurt a lot at the time but I'm okay now.'

Mike felt a pang of guilt pulsate up his spine.

Will looked at him, with his face contorted.

'Anyway, I was wondering if uhh...' Mike was desperately attempting to steer the conversation away from the *injury* situation. Although, this topic was probably not the best choice because it made Mike so visibly anxious.

'Will,' Mike grabbed his hands even tighter. 'I was wondering if you would like to go on a date with me. If that's cool with you. If it's not weird. We can do whatever you want. We can stay here. Or go to the movies. Or whatever you like. We can do a picnic. Whatever you want.'

Will blushed and squeezed Mike's hands even tighter.

Will effected a hyperbolic, dramatic voice. 'It would be an honour, my prince.'

Will turned in his chair to lay on Mike's lap and Mike re-adjusted

himself, so both of his legs came up onto the couch. Will felt safe again. But there was one thing he had to fix.

‘Michael,’ he said, sombrely.

‘Yes?’ Said Mike, somewhat proudly, still bolstered by the confidence that Will had called him “his prince”.

Will took a deep breath. He didn’t want to undo what had just happened.

‘Michael, why did you lie to me?’

Mike’s heart dropped. For a whole two seconds, he had no pulse.

‘I-I, uhh.’

Will turned to look at his best friend of over ten years and his boyfriend of over thirty seconds.

‘Tell the truth, Michael. We can’t protect each other if we’re not truthful.’

Something in Will’s voice startled Mike, as though there was *more* than he was letting on.

‘Last night, the Men on Mirkwood chased me down.’

Mike expected Will to flinch, worry, cry, or show some sort of emotion but he showed none. It unnerved Mike a bit but he continued.

‘They were yelling “GET WHEELER!” and they were shooting arrows at me.’

‘Arrows?’ Will asked, incredulous.

‘Yeah. Like bow-and-arrow arrows. Like crossbow arrows. I dodged all of them but one hit my bike wheel and I spun out of control. I ran the rest of the way home.’

Will started to tear up. He didn’t know what the macabre list on his

sketchbook meant until now.

Murder. It meant murder.

But Will wasn't going to say that right now. No way. Later today, definitely. But not right now.

'Thanks for telling me, Mike.'

Will leaned in and kissed Mike on the lips, catching him completely off-guard. It wasn't a long kiss, it was a peck. But it was on Mike's lips.

The Men on Mirkwood evaporated from Mike's mind. All he could think about was that Will Byers was in his arms. Will Byers. The boy he'd wanted in his arms for a long time now. Mike Wheeler was all too happy.

Their discussion was cut short by Mrs. Wheeler coming downstairs with some snacks. She'd made heart shaped cookies because she was firstly a caring mother and secondly someone who *loved* to stir the pot.

'I brought you two love birds some heart shaped cookies!'

Mike blushed so much he actually went pink.

'Mom!' He yelled.

'Oh, sorry sweetie, am I getting in the way?'

Will was quite literally on the floor, laughing so hard he was crying.

'Well, Michael, *somebody* has to be here to make sure you don't completely mess it up.'

Will eventually recovered, thanking Karen for the cookies and giving

her a hug. After that, he walked over to Mike and snaked an arm around his lower back. Mike put an arm around Will's shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. It took Will by surprise. He didn't expect Mike to kiss him in front of his mother.

But Karen was unfazed. In fact, she remarked how she "Wish'd she'd had a camera for such a Kodak-moment."

'He asked me out, Mrs. Wheeler,' Will said, excited.

'Ooh! So, what are you two going to do for your first date,' she asked, seemingly just as excited as Will.

Mike *couldn't stand* having a super nosy parent but Will honestly didn't mind. As far as he was concerned, the Wheeler family was his family. Mike fidgeted uncomfortably while Will talked to Karen about the plan.

'Well, I'd always wanted to do a picnic and then go see a movie, but I'm thinking instead we should have our first date here. In the basement. We can set up a picnic blanket and then watch a movie later tonight, as long as that's okay with you.'

'Of course it's okay, sweetie! What movie are you going to watch?'

'Well I was thinking *Grease*.'

Mike let out a small grunt.

Karen laughed. 'Mike isn't a big fan of *Grease*.'

'How could he be? He's never seen it,' Will pointed out, nudging Mike.

Mike looked at Will and his mother, slightly annoyed.

'Well boys, I'll be upstairs if you need me. And don't be too loud, *Michael*, your sister is asleep upstairs.' And with that, Karen left the basement.

'You really don't want to watch *Grease*,' Will asked.

‘I mean, I just, I don’t know...’

‘It’s a great movie! You’ll love it. It’s a classic, trust me.’

Mike looked at him for a second.

‘I’ll do it because I love you, not because musicals are my thing,’ Mike said.

Time literally stopped. Mike just told Will he loved him. In person.

‘I love you too, Michael,’ Will said, instinctively speaking with his heart.

Mike’s eyes lit up. He had been so concerned that he went too fast with Will.

‘You really do?’

‘I really do what,’ Will asked.

‘You really love me,’ Mike clarified.

Will put his right hand around Mike’s cheek.

‘For as long as I can remember.’

Tears welled up in Mike’s eyes.

‘I, umm...’

Will held Mike’s gaze, as though waiting for him to complete what he was going to say.

‘Will, you’re awesome. And I know things have been hard for you for the last few years. Well. Well, I mean, basically your whole life. Not in a bad way. It’s just, uhh, I mean that I know that things have been tough for you. But you need to know that you’re an amazing person.’

‘Mike, I—’

Mike’s eyes went wide.

‘ONE SEC! I forgot to give you something!’ Mike ran out of the room, leaving a starstruck Will Byers very confused.

Mike came running down the stairs fast enough that he tripped over Will’s bag, accidentally kicking out his sketchbook.

‘Ahh, *shit!*’ Mike screamed.

‘*MICHAEL!*’ He heard his mother scream.

‘Sorry mom!’ He yelled back.

‘Here! I know you’re the creative one but I had to give it a try.’

Mike handed Will a piece of paper, which he half expected to be written in numbers but it wasn’t. It was all words.

‘Mike, what, what’s this?’

Mike’s smile was so broad. He couldn’t contain his happiness.

‘ I don’t know if it’s any good. Just *read* it, William.’

FOR Will,

If you’re lucky in life you make good friends,

But as we grow we see what the universe intends.

Because you and I have a few other friends

That we love dearly, on which our life depends.

But what do we do when two friends feel more?

How do we answer nature’s one true call?

Do we resist, fight and escape in the night?

Or we do we embrace love and feel true delight?

Everyone told me to find a nice pretty lady in white.

But my best friend is my future and my love is his right.

So to Will, my one, my only, my dearest.

You turn me upside down

And make my heart delirious.

But you're the best thing ever.

I love you now

And I think I've loved you forever.

Will could barely process this. It was so adorable. And whilst not the most *structured* of poems, it was genuine. Mike had done his best to make it sweet and caring.

Mike gave Will a kiss on the forehead and went to fix Will's bag. He felt bad for kicking it, even by accident.

Will sat, transfixed on the poem until Mike's voice broke the silence.

'Will, what in the hell is this?'

Mike was holding up Will's unfinished landscape drawing. Mike had found the drawing from this morning.

Will's heart fell off a cliff. He'd hidden away a monstrosity because Mike had been so wonderful to him and he didn't want to ruin it. Mike had put so much effort into alleviating Will's concerns and making today perfect for him that he didn't even *want* Mike to know. He knew he'd have to tell him eventually, he'd just hoped for one day away from the horrors he faced when he was away from Mike.

Clearly that wish would not be granted today.

'*Will!* Talk to me!' Mike was yelling.

Will went to speak but all that escaped his mouth was a pained exhale.

Dustin and Lucas were riding their bikes at a comfortable speed on their way home from school.

‘I’m telling you, man, they’re not going to want to talk to us. At least not as much,’ said Lucas.

‘You can’t say that,’ Dustin replied atonally, clearly tired of placating his friend.

‘Yes, I can. You know how this works. Why is it different between two guys?’

‘Oh please, they’re our best friends.’

‘Yes and now they love each other.’

Dustin stared at Lucas, clearly astounded.

‘They’ve *always* loved each other.’

‘Yeah but now they *know* that,’ Lucas retorted.

‘Lucas, aren’t you happy for them?’

‘Yeah, I just don’t want to lose two of my best friends because they decide they don’t need us anymore.’

‘Of course they still need us. Just let them get settled in and they’ll be fine.’

Dustin and Lucas arrived at Mike’s place. Thursdays were always a games night.

Lucas stood proudly behind Dustin, as if waiting to be proved right.

Dustin knocked on the door and Karen answered the door.

‘Oh, hi boys, one sec, I’ll get Mike.’

She disappeared momentarily and Mike arrived at the door, flustered, with red cheeks and from what Dustin could see, recently wiped away tears.

‘Hi, uhh, sorry guys, game night is off tonight.’

‘But we haven’t seen you—’ Mike cut Dustin off.

‘I’m sorry, I’ve just got too much going on. I just—’

‘Mike, we ca—’

‘Dustin, *listen*, I don’t have time for this right now, okay? Just go, I’ll talk to you guys later. Thanks for stopping by, I jus— I just need some time!’

He slammed the door in his best friend’s face, something he’d never done before. Mike wasn’t thinking. Mike wasn’t being his usual calm, collected, logical self. Mike was angry. Mike was upset. And Mike looked scared.

‘What did I tell you he’d do,’ Lucas said, exasperated.

‘Something’s not right.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean something’s not right - Mike doesn’t always act like that!’ Dustin was serious and sincere.

‘Who knows, man.’ Lucas grabbed the handlebars of his bike and started to turn it.

‘Lucas, when have you ever known Mike to act like that? He’s never done anything like that. Ever. In his whole life.’

Lucas wasn’t persuaded.

‘Have you ever seen Mike act like that, to anyone? He’s never rude and he would *never* slam the door in his best friend’s face. This isn’t love, this is fear. He doesn’t want us involved,’ Dustin pleaded.

‘So good, we won’t get involved. I’m going home.’

Dustin threw his hands up in the air.

‘He’s *worried*, Lucas! He’s been like this for a while now and it’s all been linked to one thing.’

‘What’s that?’ Lucas said, indifferently.

‘Mirkwood. Remember? Will said he saw something there. And there’s nothing else that’s been weird about the past few days.’

‘You mean other than the fact that they’ve both realised that they like *kissing each other*? And besides, Will didn’t bring it up again.’

Then Lucas remembered. Last night, Mike tried to reach him over the two-way. Lucas thought he was dreaming but he mustn’t have been. It was late, too. Mike said he had something to tell him.

‘Dustin, Mike tried to talk to me last night. He seemed desperate. I was half-asleep so I thought it was a dream or something.’

‘Well, what are we going to do,’ Dustin said.

‘We’re going to Mirkwood,’ Lucas said. ‘Tonight.’

Only minutes before, things were getting heated in the Wheeler’s basement.

‘You *just* told me we had to be honest with each other!’ Mike said, in a raised voice.

Will had tears rolling down his face. Mike had never been angry, let alone *this* angry at him before. He was practically yelling at him.

‘How could you not tell me this?’

‘I—I was trying to protect you. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.’

‘You just said we can’t prot—‘

‘Please, Michael, stop yelling at me. *Please!*’

Will was crying even more, trying to rub the tears away from his pixelating vision. But his efforts were in vain. He couldn’t stop crying.

All at once, Mike realised his mistake. *Never yell at Will*, he remembers thinking. *Will’s father used to yell at him*, he remembered. From a young age, Will would come to school wiping tears away from his face. Mike was the only person he told about his father’s abuse.

‘Oh my God, Will, I’m so sorry.’

Mike rushed to a ruined and stricken Will. He grabbed the box of tissues underneath the television set.

‘Here,’ Mike said, as he dabbed the tears from Will’s eyes. Will, all of a sudden, seemed to look better.

‘Tell me what happened this morning, okay?’

‘Okay, okay, I just—’

Will blew his nose and wiped away the remaining tears. His cheeks were bright red.

‘Will.’

‘Y-yes, Mike?’

‘No more secrets, okay? You don’t have to deal with anything alone. *Anything*. Okay?’

Will nodded.

Mike put an arm around him and kissed him on his bright red, radiantly warm cheek.

‘I’ve always been here for you. I’ll always be here for you. Even if you can’t see me, I’m here. I love you, William.’

Will nodded.

He told Mike the whole story, from start to finish. He told him about the men with daggers and the list. He told them how he was so worried about Jordan but he didn't know what to do. Mike painfully told him that Jordan had been reported missing that morning, news that punched Will in the gut. But Mike wouldn't withhold it from him. No way. No more secrets.

Mike teared up but hardly let it show. Unlike Karen, Will wasn't as good at detecting when Mike hid his tears.

Karen called Mike upstairs to answer the door. Mike was wiping his eyes on his sweater on his way up the stairs. He got a strange look from his mother.

After she heard the way he spoke to Dustin, she had to intrude.

'Michael, are you—'

'Fine, mom.'

'Is everything okay down there?'

'Everything's great, mom. Dandy.'

'Is Will okay?'

'Will is as perfect as he always has been. Umm, do we have *Grease* on video?'

'Of course, honey,' she said, wryly grinning.

'Thanks, mom.'

Mike raced back downstairs to a shaken Will Byers.

'Dustin and Lucas were at the door.'

'You should've let them in!'

'No, Will. It's our date tonight. We'll tell them all of this tomorrow, okay? We'll go and look for Jordan tomorrow. The police are out

there now and they can certainly do a better job than us. Okay? Don't worry.'

Will nodded and hugged Mike.

'You deserve your date, Will. You've been waiting years. Come on, let's make this perfect.'

Mike and Will walked upstairs to get picnic supplies and a large blanket. Karen was enthralled with what she was seeing and had already called Joyce to ask if Will could stay the night. (Naturally, Joyce had no problem with it at all.)

The picnic went off without a hitch. Mike made Will some cute little sandwiches, with all of Will's favourite toppings.

But, as much as can be, it was the kind of date you'd expect from two young men who had been friends since before they could speak.

'Okay, let's play a game,' Will said.

'Alright,' Mike agreed.

'What's the game.'

'Okay, I dare you to do something and if you do it, you can ask me any question you want and I *have* to answer.'

Mike cracked a smile.

'Challenge accepted, Will the Wise.'

Will grinned. 'Alright, I dare you to eat the entire roll of cookie dough.'

Mike looked at the tube of cookie dough, as thick as a sink-pipe and as long as a cucumber, winked at Will and, with all the bravado that a teenaged boy could muster, simply said, 'As if that's a challenge, Byers.'

Mike broke the cookie dough roll into two pieces and, quite literally, downed them both consecutively. Will was laughing as hard as

possible but had his hands clenched over his mouth in a very concerned sort of way.

‘Okay, okay, okay,’ Mike said, recovering and drinking some Coke.

‘Okay, I’ve earned my question.’

‘My God, you have, alright, go.’

‘Okay, Will. Have you ever liked someone before me. You know, in a more-than-friends type of way. Like really liked.’

Will didn’t even hesitate. ‘God no.’

Mike looked at him.

‘Michael, as if you think anyone could compete.’

This time, Mike kissed him on the mouth.

‘Your lips taste like cookie dough, Wheeler.’

‘Hey, your fault, Byers,’ Mike said, winking.

‘Alright, my turn for a dare and a question.’

‘Alright, uhhh,’ Mike was thinking of a way he could get back at Will, in the same way anyone would want to.

‘I’ve got it.’

Mike grabbed the salt and sprinkled it all over a slice of bread. He would have been sprinkling for about thirty seconds. He folded the slice of bread, so the salt wouldn’t fall out. He grabbed it in his hand and shoved it towards Will.

‘Eat it.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I’m always serious about dares.’

‘Come on, Mike. *Please* don’t make me do this,’ Will said, half-

giggling.

‘Well, you don’t have to do it but then you won’t get your question.’

Will sighed and snatched the bread off him, half out of a competitive streak, half out of wanting his one question. He tried to fold it, so he could eat it in one bite, hopefully getting more bread than salt.

‘Nah-uh, no folding.’

Will looked at Mike with a playful, coy smile.

And he downed it. It was so disgusting and salty. He definitely felt like Mike had gotten the better deal. By the time he’d eaten it, he was coughing and Mike handed him some cold water.

‘Damn, you did well with that.’

‘Mike,’ Will said, between coughs.

‘Will,’ Mike returned.

‘I hate you.’

Mike laughed. ‘Nah, you love me, you even said so yourself.’

Will winked at Mike.

‘Okay, question time. Let me think for a minute,’ said Will.

Will thought for a long time. It felt like an eternity for Mike. But there was really only one thing that Will could really think about. He really didn’t want to say it because it would put a damper on the mood. But he couldn’t help it, it more-or-less slipped out, after the events of the last day or so.

‘If I die, from those men or whatever, will you promise me you’ll find someone else who loves you as much as I do?’

Mike couldn’t have been more shocked. It was as though he’d been stabbed in the heart. He literally stumbled over his words. If he’d had a lifetime to guess what Will’s question might have been, he would

never have gotten to that.

‘Will, I—‘

‘Be honest, Mike. It’s fine.’

‘I mean, I really...’ Mike couldn’t think clearly.

‘The rules are the rules, Michael. You have to answer.’

Starting to tear up again, Mike could only say one thing.

‘No.’

‘W-what?’

‘No, I couldn’t find someone who loves me as much as you do, or find someone to love as much as I love you. I couldn’t. No way. So no, I won’t promise that at all.’

‘But if something happens to me, then—‘

‘Then I guess I’ll have to make sure nothing happens to you, won’t I?’

Will was lost for words. He collapsed into Mike’s chest, tears rolling down his cheeks.

‘Nobody can compete with you, Will.’

‘Mike, I... I love you. I love you so much.’

‘I love you too, pretty. Now, how about we watch *Grease*?’

Will nodded, smiling.

‘And we’ll talk to Dustin and Lucas about this tomorrow, okay? About everything.’

Will nodded, once again.

Mike went upstairs to get the *Grease* VHS and brought some popcorn downstairs with him.

He put the VHS in, fixed himself and Will a Coke, feigned a yawn and put his arm around the back of Will's head.

And just like that, Will's world became bright and vibrant, extinguishing the discord, the darkness and the fear.

Dustin and Lucas had just arrived on Mirkwood. They had lights on the front of their bikes, roaming down the street. They could see nothing.

Lucas had night-vision glasses and still, nothing.

'See anything?'

'Zilch,' Lucas said, clearly frustrated.

If the boys had been walking, they might have heard the rustling in the bush, or the hushed whispers but their noisy, old bikes drowned out the noise.

Until one of the Mirkwood Men made a mistake. He spoke too loudly.

'Friends of the Byers kid...'

Lucas and Dustin stopped in their tracks, just before an opening in the forest.

'Show yourself!' Lucas yelled.

'We're not afraid of you!' Dustin followed.

All of a sudden, a large figure emerged from the bushes. He seemed taller than all the others. He was cloaked, with a large, pointed dagger. *Exactly* as Will had described.

'Dustin Henderson. Lucas Sinclair. We mean you no harm.'

'Bullshit! You tried to kill our friend!'

'I can't imagine we would, dear boy. We don't kill anyone,' the figure

said, in an almost condescending manner; as though the suggestion was so ridiculous, it was amusing.

Trembling, Lucas spoke up.

‘So I guess that big-ass knife you’ve got there is just for show, right?’

‘Mr. Sinclair, we’re a hunting group. We have knives to carve the corpses of dead animals up, or to kill them quickly if we miss the first time. It’s to be humane. We wear these cloaks to disguise ourselves from animals. We would never hurt anyone. I don’t know where your information is coming from but it’s wrong.

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other.

‘It’s getting late, isn’t it, boys? You ought not to be out this late. I’ll bet your parents don’t know you’re here, do they?’

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other.

‘Well, well, well, we’re actually finishing up right now so if you’re confident enough, you can go through the forrest to get home. It’ll probably be faster. Just go around Hawkins Lab and you’ll get to the Main Street. In fact, I really think you should go through the forest. These backstreets aren’t exactly kid-friendly at this time of night.’

Dustin and Lucas looked at each other. They both had a gut feeling not to trust him. But at the same time, they felt as though they almost had no choice.

‘Thank you, we’ll do that, actually.’

‘Perfect,’ said the hooded figure. Dustin could *hear* the smile in his voice, as he walked away, with about five or six other hooded figures emerging from the bushes along Mirkwood.

Dustin and Lucas made their way through the forrest quickly, not wanting to give anything a startle. They stayed in close formation, like a U.S. Air Force squadron. Nobody could separate this duo right now.

There was a dip in the ground approaching and Dustin totally missed

it in the black of the forest. He flew forward, off his bike as the front wheel got stuck in the ditch.

‘Shit! Dustin, are you okay?’

Dustin wasn’t actually injured at all. He got up, perfectly fine. Shaken, yes, but Dustin was fairly used to falling over at this point.

Lucas helped him up and dusted him off.

‘I’m fine, man, I’m *fine*.’

‘Okay!’ Lucas said, defensively.

They heard something move behind them. It wasn’t large, in fact, it sounded like a possum or something small. They turned to find a group of ants leading a trail somewhere into the bush. It didn’t look far, so they got the torches from the front of their bikes and followed the ants to a collapsed tree branch.

With a bit of effort, they lifted the branch to find the source of the ants’ interest. It so turned out that this location had been a source of interest for many insects and animals over the past 24 hours.

Dustin and Lucas nearly vomited as it registered that they were looking at the cold, decomposing, lifeless corpse of Jordan Sharpe. Lucas noticed immediately that he had a gigantic knife wound along his neck.

‘They’ve seen it!’ croaked an unrecognisable voice, in a haunting whisper.

‘Can’t you all just leave things alone,’ the same voice cried.

Silently, a skinny, pale white arm wrapped around Lucas’s neck.

‘*HOLY SHIT!*’ Dustin yelled.

Dustin shone his torch on the figure, who was clearly a man. Or maybe, was a man. Something like that. Definitely a man, Dustin figured he must have escaped from some sort of crazy hospital. The man was tall, bald with a coconut-shaped head. He had menacing

eyes, a pointed nose and wrinkles. He was wearing a cloth around his waist and nothing else. His legs and arms were equally as skinny; he looked like he hadn't eaten in weeks, maybe months. He stood and walked more like an undead creature, rather than a person.

Dustin tried to push the man off Lucas but the man was strong. He just pushed Dustin over.

'You saw *it*, you mustn't leave now!' the man commanded in a raspy, damaged voice.

'HELP! HELP! HELP!' Dustin yelled.

Two patrolling police officers heard Dustin's screams. Luckily, they were close enough to the end of the forest, near a major road that goes through Hawkins to be heard. The police ran to the scene and the unknown, strong man, released Lucas and disappeared as silently and swiftly as he'd arrived. The police never saw him.

In a town like Hawkins, everyone knew everyone. The police officer on duty was Officer Nathan Adams, Mrs. Adams' son. He was with Officer Jamie Ingleburn, a new officer, as well.

'Boys, what is going on?'

'Officer, officer! Come quick! We found...' Dustin couldn't finish the sentence.

The two officers raced up to the boys.

'Oh, Jesus Christ,' said Officer Adams.

He said he would call it in. Officer Ingleburn drove Dustin and Lucas home, where he explained to their parents what had happened. Suffice it to say, both sets of parents were not happy. Officer Ingleburn hadn't told the parents about Jordan. The police wanted to do that themselves in the morning, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe first. He made the boys swear to secrecy, for the good of the family.

Lucas and Dustin had never been more terrified in their entire life. Both simply accepted that they wouldn't get a wink of sleep that night.

At the Wheeler household, *Grease* had finished and Mike and Will had both showered. Mike let Will borrow a set of his pyjamas, which might seem romantic to most but really wasn't to either of them. They'd been friends for so long and borrowing each other's pyjamas for sleep overs had just become a habit.

But something was different this time. This time, Mike didn't get a pull-out mattress.

'Do you want me to get my own bed, Mike?'

'Ahh, actually, Will, I was wondering if, uhh...' Mike didn't know how to phrase his question.

'If what?'

'If you want to come and cuddle with me tonight.'

Will's eyes lit up and he climbed across Mike's bed. He got under the bedspread and Mike enveloped him in a hug. Mike's arms were so much larger than Will's. Mike moved his hand down Will's side, lightly running his nails against his skin, and grabbed Will's hand.

He kissed Will on the back of the head.

'Goodnight, boyfriend.'

Will moved his hand up his body, dragging Mike's along with it. He leant down and gave Mike's hand a sloppy kiss, to try to make up for the fact he couldn't give Mike a kiss on the face without making it uncomfortable.

'Goodnight, boyfriend,' Will said.

Mike pressed his face against the top of Will's head and hugged him tighter than he ever had before. Will arched back, as to be closer to Mike.

As Mike was about to fall asleep, he noticed Will trembling. He knew why.

‘Will.’

‘Yeah,’ Will said, jolting a little.

‘Nobody can get you here, okay? My dad and my mom are asleep two doors down and Nancy is still awake studying. And I’m here. No grim-reaper try-hard is going to get through me, okay?’

Will just nodded slowly.

Mike stroked his thumb along Will’s enclosed hand. It made Will feel safer and more relaxed for some reason.

‘I love you, Michael.’

‘I love you too, William.’

And with that, Will Byers fell asleep, having the best sleep of his life. His dreams that night were filled with nothing evil, nothing vicious nor scary. The evening Hawkins chill couldn’t even reach him in the arms of Mike Wheeler. He had a dream that he was singing to Mike. He was singing a song from *Grease*. By the morning, all he’d remember from the dream are some of his favourite lines from the musical.

We’ll always be together,

We’ll always be together.

5. The Plan and the Computer

Summary for the Chapter:

Today is the funeral of Jordan Sharpe. Yet, that's the least significant aspect of the day... Will, Mike, Dustin and Lucas refuse to let more die senselessly. There's a plan. The question is, who are they fighting? Who is trying to hurt them?

THE CRYPTO KIDS

CHAPTER 5: THE PLAN AND THE COMPUTER

TRIGGER WARNINGS: math... although less math than other times.

CONTENT WARNINGS: Cuteness, teen love. Mike and Will have their first political debate! (It was time, tbh.)

MATURE AUDIENCES: Mike & Will kiss in this chapter. *Reader discretion advised.*

Three days had passed since Will Byers fell asleep, safely wrapt in Mike's arms. Yet, Mike still woke every morning with a part of him still expecting Will to be snuggled up to him. He still replays that morning in his head, over and over. Will is *much* better than Mike in the morning, so Will woke up first. He didn't move at all. He snuggled up, closer to Mike, ensconcing himself in his much taller and broader boyfriend's chest. He pulled the covers tighter and kissed Mike's hand. Mike was barely conscious at the time, yet he was able to feel Will pulling closer to him. Mike felt loved. He felt like he could truly become the man that Will Byers deserved. And that made him feel powerful – the kind of power you need to accept love.

But today was a hard day. Today was Jordan's funeral. Everyone had pretended to be unaffected by it - but naturally, this was all a facade. No teenager wants to be caught crying or being upset, especially as they all felt guilty for not doing more to make Jordan feel more included - Will especially. The story around town was that he'd committed suicide, which Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas all knew was bullshit. But there hadn't been any official word yet, so it was all just speculation. Will said that nobody wants to believe there are murderers in Hawkins. Mike couldn't help but agree.

Will said he was fine but Mike saw a sketch he'd drawn of Jordan. He'd drawn Jordan as an angel, holding a microphone as he ascended into the sky. Will was hurting. Will felt bad. And that made it Mike's problem.

Mike had gone looking for Dustin one afternoon, only to find him curled up in the corner in the lighting box in the school hall (where the plays and musicals were produced), crying. Mike sat down next to him, found him some tissues and said nothing. Dustin wasn't Will. Dustin didn't need affection all the time. Sometimes, Dustin just needed you to be there. He was forever grateful to have Mike, someone who just understood that.

Lucas was a little different. Lucas was angry. He vented to Will about how disgusting it was, that Jordan was hurt because of his sexuality. By this point, Will and Mike had brought the gang up to speed about the list, about everything. Lucas was mad. Will was in tears most of the day. Dustin needed someone to just sit with him.

And Mike felt like he'd been split into thirds. He didn't even know how to feel because he hadn't had time to have a reaction. At this point, Mike didn't even realise anymore. He just wanted to help his friends.

So all he could do was remember that cool, winter morning, holding Will, pecking his neck, running his nails along his arm and holding his hand until they *absolutely* had to get up. Mike had never been one for corny sentiment but he now realised what was meant when people said love could change the world.

'Michael!'

Mike nearly fell out of bed.

'Yes mom?'

'I'm not *mom*!'

Mike was confused for a millisecond, that felt like an eternity.

'Nance?'

'Ugh! Just open the door, would you?'

Mike nearly fell out of bed, rubbing his eyes. He was wearing nothing but *Iron Man* boxers. He opened the door quickly, after which a barrage of light forced his eyes closed.

‘Oh, God, who turned on the sun,’ he moaned, raising his hand to cover his squinted eyes.

‘Michael! Put some clothes on, Jesus!’

Mike’s vision was starting to recover and he was able to see his sister’s grimace. It was the kind one might receive after having been caught placing a whoopee cushion under someone’s chair; a sort of disdainful, yet forgiving, gaze.

‘Nancy, we used to take baths together.’

‘Ew, God, ew, don’t remind me!’

‘And this isn’t the first pair of boxers you’ve seen this week.’

‘How did you even kn—‘

‘I didn’t, thanks for telling me,’ Mike cut in, winking.

Nancy slapped her brother on the arm.

‘Ow! Jesus, sis, not this early in the morning. Chill, I won’t say anything.’

‘I’m chill,’ Nancy replied, indignant.

‘Now *what* do you want,’ Mike asked, still confused as to why Nancy had unceremoniously dragged him out of bed.

Nancy walked in and shut the door behind her.

‘Take a seat on the bed, why don’t you? Want some chocolate from my secret stash while you’re at it?’

‘You have a secret stash?’

‘I’m a teenaged boy, I stash many things.’

Nancy jerked her head back and grimaced in disgust, as though a dirty towel had been thrown at her face.

‘Gross, Mike. Does Will know you’re this gross?’

Mike was lackadaisically looking for clothes to wear in his closet.

‘He’s been my best friend of like, ten years. Of course he knows but he loves me anyway.’

Mike walked over to his closet to find the pants his mother had picked out for him. He found them almost instantly.

‘You’re lucky as all hell, you know?’

‘What?’ Mike said, turning around as he tried pulling his pants up all the way. They were black, suit pants. Mike *hated* wearing them. It wasn’t his style and it wasn’t Jordan’s either. But funerals are funerals, or so he was told.

‘Will loves you so, so much.’

‘I know,’ came the reply, as Mike was buttoning up his shirt.

‘Love’s a gift, Mike.’

‘The best gift ever,’ Mike couldn’t help thinking aloud.

A silence ensued. The two siblings couldn’t help but think that they were so lucky, especially with all that was going on. They both had someone to rely on - Nancy had Steve and Mike had Will. Nobody could take that away.

‘So,’ Mike broke the silence after what felt like an eternity. Nancy glanced at him, turning her neck towards him with mechanical dexterity - as though she had been shocked back into the normal dimension.

‘How’s Stevie Wonder in bed?’ Mike had a wry smile, as he was fixing up his black tie.

‘Michael!’ She threw a pillow at him.

‘I’m *kidding*. Or am I? Who will ever know?’

‘You’re a little shit.’

Mike winked at her. The beauty of having an older sister was being able to make these jokes. Nancy would pretend to hate it but it was clear to Mike that she enjoyed their relationship more, as Mike was becoming more mature.

‘How are Will’s pashing skills?’

Mike looked at her with a focused glare, like a CCTV camera zeroing in on some sort of suspicious activity.

‘His *what?*’

‘You know! His kissing skills. You know...’ She stuck her tongue out in such a way that Mike was *sure* resembled a goanna, or lizard, or reptile of some description.

‘If that’s how you’re making out with Steve then my *God...*’

She threw another pillow at him.

‘Heteros are weird,’ Mike said, chuckling. He’d finally gotten changed and came to sit next to Nancy on his bed, as he put his socks on.

‘But since you asked, Will is an amazing kisser. Or, what did you say? “Pasher”?’

‘Yes, Michael, yes. That’s what I said.’

‘Well, he’s great at it. He’s awesome, actually.’ Mike couldn’t help but let his mind wander back to the other night. And last night.

‘Michael,’ Nancy said. She extended her finger in a very disciplinary, mother-type of way. (Mike couldn’t help but notice she did it the same way that Karen did.)

‘This is important, Michael.’

Michael examined her. He made a subtle, confused scowl, as though prompting her to get on with it.

‘No sex, you hear me?’

Mike contorted his facial features so strongly that he could feel his jaw tighten.

‘Uhhh, ew! What on earth would— why would you even—‘

Nancy rushed to her own defence.

‘It’s just, I know you’re a teenaged boy and teenaged boys have’—she paused for a moment—‘urges. And I just think *someone* should have the “talk” with you.’

‘That’s gross. Like, ew. I mean, it’s not gross. Will’s not gross. He’s perfect. But no. It will never happen.’

Nancy looked at her brother, scathingly.

‘It *will* happen. But not until you’re 16, okay? *AND* not until Will’s 16.’ She waited a minute and felt like she had to explain. ‘The legal age of consent in Indiana is 16.’

‘I know! And just, can we stop talking about this?’

Before now, Mike hadn’t really considered the idea of sex. He understood logically that relationships manifest into sexual relationships as it brings you closer. And it ought to feel good. But with *Will*? His best friend? His *boyfriend*? He’d never considered that. It made him a little uncomfortable, if he was being totally honest. He loved Will, that was certain. But he wasn’t ready to deal with this idea just yet.

‘Sorry, Mike. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. It’s just that I know that people desire closeness in times like this, when things are hard. And I just—‘

‘You’re right, Will and I aren’t close enough as it is.’

‘That’s not what I meant, Michael.’

He knew it. He was trying to be jarring. As far as he could see, anything of this (extremely sensitive) matter was between he and Will. He wasn’t even comfortable having this conversation. It made him feel awkward.

‘Mike,’ Nancy continued, ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel weird or awkward. I should’ve known that this would be a different sort of topic with you. I don’t know *exactly* how it works with gay relationships and I was just trying to help. I just don’t want you making mistakes.’

Mike looked at her, almost prompting her to continue.

‘It’s just that sex is a big deal. It’s not something that you can take lightly and it’s not something that Will would take lightly. And I don’t want you two to make any stupid mistakes, doing it too early because you feel like you should, or you have to. And I mean, you’re 15, so it’ll be less than a year before you’re *legally* allowed to have sex. But just... just be aware of that. It’s not something that’s easy. And, just because you turn 16 doesn’t mean you *need* to have sex. People develop at different speeds, Mike.’

‘I had never even thought about it before now. I just... I’m just—’

‘I screwed up, Mike. I shouldn’t have brought this up today. I’m sorry. I just, I haven’t been able to speak to you the last few days because I’ve been busy with A.P. Calculus and I felt like I should talk to you. Plus, it’s better me than mom.’

Mike conceded that having *another* conversation about sex with his mother would probably kill him. He had a flashback to that horrible, awkward discussion at the age of 13. The horror!

Mike just hugged his sister.

‘Oh,’ she involuntarily remarked.

‘I love you, Nance. Thanks for looking out for me.’

He’d been calling her “Nance” more often, something that her best friend, Barb Holland, called her. She didn’t mind, though. They were growing closer each day. Their relationship changed from a childhood sibling rivalry, with hair pulling, name-calling, slapping and moments of closeness to an adult, mature friendship. Nancy was like Mike’s older best friend, while Mike was like Nancy’s rebellious young friend, who often reminded her that she should do crazy stuff

every now and then, just to keep ahead of the curve that is life. In all logical terms, they were both massive nerds who had just discovered that they had more in common than they realised.

‘What are you doing tonight, Nance?’

‘A.P. Calculus.’

‘Damn, you love your derivatives that much?’

‘How do you even know what a derivative is?’

Mike looked at her, smiling, clearly impressed with himself.

‘Who *doesn’t* know what a derivative is, Nancy?’

She looked at him like he was some genius, freaky kid. (Which he was, as far as she was concerned.)

‘Fine,’ Mike said, ‘I stole your textbook and taught myself.’

She looked at him, annoyed yet astounded.

‘I had to! I was doing stuff with statistics. And if you need help, I could probably teach you.’

‘Are you serious?’ Nancy was smiling. She honestly admired her brother (although she would never say).

Mike walked over to his desk and dug up a pile of notes. Listed on the top was the heading:

A.P. Calculus Notes - Derivatives, written by Mike Wheeler.

He handed her the stack of paper.

Nancy glanced through the notes and got pieces of information.

“Derivatives are the mathematical proof of measuring the rate of change for any given location on any given function...”

“Derivatives are used in many different areas of science, in fact, almost in all...”

"The derivative from first principles was first penned by Isaac Newtown in the 1600s and it looks like..."

'Wow.'

"The answers to the questions on page 43 are in there somewhere too. Those are the ones you've been struggling with, right?"

'How did you...'

'Lucky guess, I thought they were a bit challenging, even for college-level questions.'

She looked at Mike, at this point just astounded.

'How much of this stuff do you know?'

Mike starred at her.

'Fine, I know up to multivariable calculus.'

'That's taught at college, Michael.'

'I know. The librarian said the same thing. Why do people keep telling me that?' Mike smiled.

Nancy wasn't sure if he was kidding or not.

'I humbly accept your offer for tutelage, Michael.'

'That was a strange word but alright.'

He left his room and went out to go check himself in the mirror. Nancy followed him and helped him fix his tie and his hair.

'Hey Nance,' he asked, hesitantly.

'Mmhm,' she said, focused on trying to fix his bed hair.

'Do you think Will... you know, finds me... sexy?'

'Duh,' came the reply, nonchalantly.

‘What do you mean “Duh”?’

‘Michael, are you telling me you understand college-level math but not how relationships work?’

‘You’re the expert on *human anatomy*, aren’t you?’

She slapped him.

‘I still can’t believe you said that in front of mom.’

‘I still can’t believe you don’t see how *great* that line was.’

‘Michael, Michael, Michael.’

‘What, what, what?’

‘Why is Will attracted to you?’

‘I dunno. We’ve been friends for ages. Mom thinks it’s because I make him feel loved. I just think it’s because he thinks I’m funny. And I always protect him. I dunno. I just love him and I think it’s the same for him.’

Nancy laughed.

‘Humans have evolved a lot, Mike. But not that much. Maybe he liked you a lot for those reasons when he was younger, maybe. You were his best friend that he could always rely on. The one who’d always come for him. The one who always supported his art and crazy story ideas and stood up to bullies for him. And that definitely added to it because he feels like you can protect him. But your friends protect him too and he protects them. So, why you?’

Mike did the trademark teenaged boy shrug.

‘Jesus, Michael. He likes you because he thinks you’re smokin’.’

‘I’m what?’ Mike couldn’t help but laugh.

‘He thinks you’re hot.’

‘How would you even—’

‘Trust me, Michael. It’s definitely not the only reason. He loves you because of *you*. But there’s chemistry there.’ She finished fixing his hair.

‘Alright, you’re done. Go get your jacket and we’ll head off.

‘I haven’t eaten breakfast.’

‘Well you should’ve gotten up earlier.’

They both went downstairs and Karen gave Mike a rolled up pancake.

‘Eat it in the car and wake up earlier, would you?’

‘He can’t, mom, he was dreaming about Will.’

Mike slapped his sister.

Ted, Karen, Mike and Nancy all got in the family car to go the funeral. Mike and Nancy were still slapping each other in the back of the car. It was playful but it annoyed Karen. It wasn’t the time, plus, Mike was spilling pancake all over the back seat.

‘Would the two of you *grow up*, we’re going to a funeral today. My God, it’s like you don’t *care*.’

That hit Mike hard. He knew his mom was only agitated and she didn’t mean it. But it hurt. Mike cared. Mike cared *a lot*. Mike was so busy caring about everyone these past few days that nobody had even checked on him. He rested his head on the window of his dad’s car and drooped his face. He held the rest of his half-eaten pancake in his hand.

‘I do care.’

‘What,’ came the reply from Karen.

‘You said I don’t care. I do care. I care a lot. I care more than you could possibly know.’

‘Michael, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. That was wrong,’ was all Karen could think to say. She didn’t screw up often but she’d

always admit it when she did.

‘It’s okay. It’s fine.’

Nancy unclipped her seat belt and moved into the middle seat, at her mother and father’s shock. She re-buckled her seat belt and put an arm around Mike.

‘*Eat*’, was all she said.

He rested his head on her shoulder and started to cry.

He remembered all the times that Jordan had talked to Will. Hell, he probably told Jordan he was gay before he told anyone else. He remembered Dustin talking to Jordan about Broadway shows and about acting, and theatre and all the other things drama kids talk about. He remembered that Lucas was apprehensive at first with Jordan but it didn’t take long. As soon as Jordan had mentioned James Bond, Lucas was hooked.

And he remembered how Jordan told Mike how much Will adored him. He remembered some of what he said. “You’re lucky to have a best friend like Will,” “I wish someone liked me like that,” “Will would do anything for you.” Now, it makes sense. *He was trying to tell Mike that Will had a crush on him.*

And all at once, it became too much. The universe seemed to roll on its axis in every dimension and Mike’s world flipped. Jordan had been most likely murdered for no other reason than being gay. Mike was a target. Will was a target. Which meant that everyone they cared about was a target. It became too much. The downward force on Mike’s entire life crushed him and he started to cry hysterically into his sister’s shoulder.

He eventually looked out the window and, through tear-blurred vision, he saw that they had arrived at the Church.

Will had been in a surprisingly collected mood all morning. He ate breakfast calmly, washed up and got changed without emotional ruptures. At this point, he'd talked to Mike so much, as well as Dustin, Lucas Jonathan and Joyce about what had happened. He even talked to Nancy about it. Everyone was there for him. He felt all too loved, despite the looming threat of psychopathic serial killers tracking his every move.

Mike had created a topographical map of Hawkins, trying to determine where the Mirkwood Men might be hiding. His math-genius, Sherlock Holmes-inspired boyfriend had uncovered something unnerving. He remembers the meeting clearly.

{ONE DAY BEFORE}

'Will, there's no-where to hide. You can't live in the forest. Plus, Dustin and Lucas went through there and there can be nobody living in the forest - there wasn't any buildings. Humans need shelter to survive.'

'Weren't,' Dustin corrected.

'What,' Mike asked.

'You said "wasn't" when you should've said "weren't". It's bad grammar.'

Lucas slapped Dustin, who mouthed "What?" to him, defensively.

'Whatever, anyway,' Mike continued.

Will stared at his boyfriend intently. They were in Mike's basement and Mike had a massive map of Hawkins drawn on butcher's paper,

with near-perfect scale. Dustin and Lucas looked on as Mike presented his findings.

‘So what’s your point,’ Will asked.

‘My point is there’s no where to hide that’s clear or obvious. It’s unlikely they’re travelling into Hawkins, plus they know who in the town is, you know...’

‘Gay.’ Dustin filled in, without hesitation.

‘So they know us.’

‘So what are you saying,’ Will reiterated, following along.

‘I’m saying that if there’s no where obvious to hide then there’s only one explanation. They’re hiding in plain sight. It’s a group of people here, in Hawkins.’

They all paused. There was a moment of shock as the reality of the situation hit them. The Mirkwood Men lived among them.

‘Except for the one thing you haven’t mentioned,’ asserted Lucas, starring at the map. He pointed to a large, rectangular box, right next to Mirkwood. It had giant, bold letters in the middle:

HNL

Hawkins National Laboratory.

‘What, you think the *government* is behind these attacks? Why would the government do that, they’re on our side,’ Mike argued with a little bit of passion.

‘*Nineteen Eighty-Four*,’ Will said, quietly.

‘What,’ Mike asked, turning to him.

‘Haven’t you read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?’

Mike looked at him like he was speaking another language.

‘It’s about the surveillance society. One of the themes is the use of

technology to spy and rid anyone who might think differently to what the government wants you to think.'

'Will, that's pretty far-fetched,' Dustin said.

'Really? You don't *think* that Reagan benefits from the picturesque American Dream? The white family, husband, wife, cute kids with a white-picket fence in a suburb somewhere?'

Everyone was staring at him.

'All I'm saying is you shouldn't rule out the potential corruption of governments.'

'This isn't a communist country, Will. Things like that don't happen here,' Mike said.

'No, you're right. Watergate happened in Russia. Only *communist* countries are corrupt.'

Everyone turned to Will. He had a type of intelligence that the others didn't. Mike was highly mathematical, highly strategic yet also creative. Lucas was cunning, yet fair and balanced. Dustin was empathetic, yet persistent and righteous. But Will, Will was the mirror to Mike. Will could follow logic, yet was intensively creative. He had a knack for anything artistic, as well as the humanities. Mike was convinced he could take A.P. classes in History *now*. He had the same willpower as Mike and he had no issues telling the love of his life when he thought he overlooked something. Will understood that logic will get Mike as far as he wants most of the time, but sometimes Mike's frame of reference is off. Will felt his job was to steer him back on course.

'All I'm saying is that if Nixon used the FBI to his advantage, why wouldn't Reagan?'

'Because that's *illegal*,' Mike said.

'It's illegal when you're caught.'

'You've been talking to Jonathan about politics too much,' said Mike, nudging Will's arm.

‘And you’ve been listening to your dad too much,’ replied Will, slightly offended.

‘I agree with Will,’ Dustin said, with Lucas nodding in agreement.

‘You can’t deny that there are many people in this country who aren’t exactly the biggest fans of the gays, Mike,’ Lucas said.

‘You mean a majority,’ Will commented, in a low, suppressed tone.

Mike put an arm around him and kissed him on the head.

‘It’ll get better.’

Mike had learned about statistics and how to use them. He’d taken Nancy’s A.P. Calculus book to learn about measuring change and using graphs, then he’d borrowed one of Mr. Clarke’s college statistics books. If his math was right, and it usually was, the country will flip to a majority in support of the gay rights movement eventually. But his earliest prediction for statistically significant change was 1994. So, just over ten years from now. He’d shared his findings with Will and his mom, as well as his dad. He wanted to check with his dad, who worked in sales. He felt like there had to be *some* math in that. His dad seemed to have less of an idea than his mom did, though. She picked up numbers almost as quickly as Mike.

‘Fine, I acknowledge that the Lab could be a concern. But *why* would the government go after us? I mean, really? Us, specifically? Does the government hire serial killers now? Surely government assassins would kill in the night? You know, James Bond style. It’s too obvious and too... out there, for the government.’

‘I guess government agents don’t scribble hitlists on your artworks,’ Will conceded.

‘Unless they’re framing someone,’ Lucas said.

Everyone again turned to Lucas.

‘Three letters, K. K. K.’

‘The psychopaths who kill people of colour,’ Will asked.

‘Exactly,’ Lucas said.

‘Since when do the KKK hate the gays,’ Dustin interjected.

All of a sudden, it hit Will.

‘Don’t you remember the allegations that members of congress were part of the KKK?’

‘Those allegations were dismissed,’ Mike said.

‘And Nixon was pardoned,’ Will retorted with the wit of a journalist.

‘But that still doesn’t explain why the U.S. government, a rich and powerful force would go after two teenagers in the back of Indiana,’ Mike postulated.

‘Out of town try-outs.’ Dustin said, thinking aloud. Everyone looked at him, confused.

‘We’re gonna need more than that,’ Lucas said.

‘Broadway shows do out of town try-outs before they go to New York. That way, they can get feedback before they launch in the city. It also means any screw ups will be forgotten. Companies like Apple do it too, they launch a product in some obscure, Californian town and get feedback. That way, if it fails, nobody will know. It’s easier to cover up that way.’

‘So, it’s like a beta test?’ Mike was getting his head around this.

‘It’s *exactly* a beta test,’ Will said, realising what was going on. ‘If the government is experimenting on gay people, especially gay teenagers, Hawkins is the *perfect* place to do it. Who is everyone going to believe? A couple of crazy families from Hawkins, or the entirety of the U.S. government?’

Everyone slowly nodded.

Mike couldn’t help but be attracted to Will’s defiance and his passion. He thought it was awesome that he and Will could debate and that their intellectual strengths complimented each other.

‘You’re right,’ Mike said.

‘God-damn it,’ Mike said, sighing and frustrated.

‘What?’ Replied Will.

‘Factoring in the resources of the U.S. government really doesn’t give us the best success chances, does it?’

‘Then I guess we need to start thinking like the government, don’t we,’ said Will.

They all starred at him, as though he was speaking nonsense.

‘Isn’t it obvious? We need a plan. But not just any plan. A proper plan. Like, a *strategic* plan.’

They thought for a while. A muted silence fell across the room as their brains worked on overcharge.

‘I’ve got something. It’s vague but it might work.’

‘Spill it, Wheeler,’ Lucas demanded.

‘It’s all about *variables*. They help statisticians narrow stuff down. Why don’t we do that?’

Dustin edged forward. ‘Because we’re *not* statisticians, Mike.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Mike said, as he started drawing what seemed to be calculations next to his map.

‘Height, the key is in the height,’ he said. ‘We can make markings on certain trees at certain heights, that way we can have a rough estimate of the height of the attackers. By ruling out people who are under a certain height, you narrow your list of possibilities. From that, you can segment more variables. It’s not much, but it’s a start.’

‘Which means you can work out who it *can’t* be, so eventually you are left with only one result.’ Dustin understood.

'If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be true,' said Mike.

'You realise you can't just quote Sherlock Holmes *all* the time,' Dustin said.

'Shut up, Watson,' Mike rebuked, punching Dustin in a sort of friendly teenaged way.

Mike finished his rough sketch of what would now be called "The Tree Map". The Tree Map was a rough sketch of Mirkwood, it detailed each tree and its codename, listed after Greek letters. A different height marking would be on each tree, which meant whoever was spying on the men was able to use logic to determine their height. For example, Tree Alpha was six feet, while Tree Beta was five and a half feet. So, if someone was between Tree Alpha and Tree Beta, their height is between five and a half and six feet. If they were closer to beta, they're closer to five and a half feet. It wasn't *exact* but it was a start. It had been pointed out that tracking this many Mirkwood Men would be a hell of a challenge, so they decided to track down the one that Lucas and Dustin had encountered. He seemed to be the leader, so he became x in the equation. So, say he was taller than Tree Beta but not Tree Alpha, it would be written as:

ALPHA < x < BETA

If he was *exactly* as tall as Tree Alpha, it would be:

ALPHA = x

And so on, as the logic followed. Mike also pointed out his height would need to be taken a few times, on a few different nights, to make sure it was the same person. He recommended at least three sightings.

'What about protection,' Lucas said, as they were wrapping up.

'Condoms can be bought from the store Will's mom works at,' Dustin said with a wry smile.

'I *meant* self-defence, you moron.' Lucas was firm. He was taking this seriously.

'I can bring my dad's gun,' he continued.

'I can bring a pocket knife. I'll hide it in my sock, so if they try to grab me I can stop them,' Mike said.

Will looked severely uncomfortable. He hated violence, in all its forms. He hated what violence was doing to his friends. He hated that Mike was in a position where he had to be ready to kill someone. He hated this entire scenario.

Dustin and Lucas went home, after exchanging pleasantries with Karen and thanking her for dinner. Will hung back with Mike.

'Will, are you okay?'

Will looked at his boyfriend intently.

'You're a dick, Mike.'

'I'm a what?'

'I'm capable of coming up with my own political opinions, thanks.'

'Oh, I never meant to—, I'm sorry, Will. I was trying to be funny. You know I love Jonathan like a brother.'

Mike really did feel sorry. He said it without thinking. He doesn't often do that but every now and then, his judgment falters, even if only momentarily.

'I shouldn't have said what I said to you, either. I didn't mean to insult your dad,' Will said, humbly.

'To be honest, you were right. It wouldn't kill me to read more.' There was a pause between them. 'What do you think of the plan?'

'I don't like violence, Michael.'

'Me neither,' was all Mike could say as Will hugged him. Will pulled him close. He'd been standing close to him all night, so Mike realised he probably needed this all too much, despite Mike's minor transgression. Will gently tugged on the back of Mike's hair,

compelling Mike pull Will closer and caress the back of his neck. The hug eventually broke and Mike planted a kiss on Will's nose. Their arms slipped down the other's, interlocking elbows.

'Will, my love, I have an important question.'

Will straightened up.

'Yeah?'

'Will, I say this with all the love I can give someone. I know this is a difficult topic for many, so you should know that I'll love you no matter what.'

'O-okay,' Will trembled.

Mike sighed, mustered all the courage he could and when he spoke, it sounded like he had rehearsed it one hundred times.

'Will, are you a communist?'

Will burst into laughter. He collapsed on Mike's chest, who was smiling and stroking Will's hair.

'No, Mr. Wheeler, I'm not a communist. I'm just a realist.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Governments are useless shit.'

'Ahh, so an anarchist.'

'I'm just anti-shit.'

'Me too, cupcake, me too.'

Will chuckled.

'Did you *seriously* just call me cupcake?'

Mike hadn't meant to, it slipped out.

'I mean, I saw someone do it the other day and thought "why not try

it”?’

‘Wheeler, I’m going to start naming *you* after assorted sweets.’

Mike conjured as much bravado as he could.

‘I happen to appreciate pet names, I think they’re cute.’

Will noticed Mike was getting stronger. He was developing muscle mass, growing rapidly and developing more masculine facial features. He also noticed that when Mike took his shirt off the other day, he was starting to get chest hair. Will figured now would be time to try something.

‘Hey Mike.’

‘Yo,’ came the reply, with Will still in Mike’s chest.

‘Can you pick me up?’

Mike looked at him, confused.

‘Do you mean, like, *physically*?’

Will nodded.

‘I’m not the most athletic of people, Will.’

But Will looked at him in such a pleading way, he thought it was cute.

‘You want me to pick you up because you’ve been reading too much romance, haven’t you?’

‘Guilty,’ Will said, raising his hands.

Mike snaked his hands around Will’s upper thighs and threw all the force he could into it.

‘Whoa,’ Will said, as he ascended with a lot more velocity than either intended. Mike could lift him easily.

‘See? I’m not that heavy,’ Will said.

‘No, you’re perfect,’ said Mike.

‘Well, if I’m so perfect, kiss me.’

Mike didn’t need further prompts. He loved kissing Will. It had taken some time to get used to but now it was at least 50% of his conscious thoughts and about 85% of his unconscious thoughts. His entire life had become centred around being with Will.

The kiss was long and passionate. Will tugged on Mike’s hair, which he seemed to really love and Mike moved his hands around Will’s lower back. Eventually, they stopped but Mike carried Will to the top of the stairs.

‘Reckon I should work out,’ he asked Will.

‘You seem to be doing pretty well without it,’ came the reply, as Will squeezed Mike’s cheeks.

That night, Karen drove Will home. All he could think was that she’d be the best mother-in-law anyone could hope to have.

{PRESENT DAY}

Will hadn’t found morning conversation hard. He hadn’t found getting changed hard. He hadn’t found getting in the car hard. He hadn’t found arriving at the church hard. He was ready to say goodbye.

Seeing Mike Wheeler wiping away tears, that was something he didn’t expect. That was hard.

He ran over as soon as he saw his pressure-cooked boyfriend.

‘Mike, Mike,’ he said, as Mike looked up.

‘Hey, Will, I’m okay, I just—’ Will hugged him.

‘You’ve been saying that all week. You’re not okay.’

Mike looked at him, wiping away fresh tears.

‘Michael, it’s *okay* not to be okay. Nobody’s going to go into shock because you have an emotion every once in a while.’

‘I just, I wanted to be there for you and for Dustin and for Lucas.’

Will felt a surge of guilt. He’d been so busy taking up Mike’s time with his own grief and fear that he’d forgotten about *Mike’s feelings*.

‘Oh my God, Michael, I’m so sorry, I just—’

‘Will, it’s fine, honestly, everything is fine.’

‘It’s not fine, you just—’

Will was interrupted by a booming, deep voice. It belonged to Nathan Adams; Officer Nathan Adams, dressed in his police uniform with a woman who appeared to be his girlfriend. She was about his height, probably about six feet, blond hair, blue eyes and was wearing a jet black dress.

‘Nobody wants to see *that*! You two should be ashamed of yourselves.’

Will became immediately distraught and Mike became extremely angry, extremely quickly.

‘You know wh—’

Karen quickly intervened, stepping in front of Mike.

‘*If* you have a problem, officer, you can address it to me. Not everybody in this town shares your views and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread them like the flu.’

Nathan Adams turned to his partner.

‘Tss alright, AIDS will get ‘em.’

Mike lunged forward but Will and Karen stopped him.

‘Not today, Michael, not here,’ Karen said.

Will grabbed Mike’s hand.

‘Who *cares* what they think? They’re starring because they’re jealous. They’re starring because they don’t have what we have.’

‘A boyfriend?’ Mike asked.

Will shook his head.

‘Great style,’ replied Will, smiling gleefully.

Will took Mike’s slowly relaxing hand and walked with him to the church. Mike couldn’t help but admire that all this time, through all the bullying and all the horrible things Will had been through, he was fine with Mike. Mike made it okay.

They entered the church and sat next to Dustin and Lucas. The church was huge, expansive and very open. It had white walls with huge stained glass windows. Will always wondered why God needed such a large house. Mike was baffled by any deity that takes attendance each Sunday.

The following hour saw to a gnawing urge to stand up and leave. Such an urge was felt by Will, Lucas, Dustin and Mike, all simultaneously. Dustin and Will were especially disgusted by how little everyone speaking knew of Jordan. They spoke about his studiousness, his difficulty with making friends and his life being “tragically” cut short. It was all fake, all a facade. His father just wanted attention. Rumours had spread he was using Jordan’s death to get a sympathy promotion at work but none of the gang believed it until now. When Chief Hopper got up to speak to say that the investigation was still ongoing, Will watched Jordan’s father start whispering to the people around him.

‘He doesn’t care, he doesn’t *fucking* care!’ Will said, in a suppressed outburst.

‘Will, Will! Not now!’ Mike urged, grabbing his hand.

Eventually, it ended. Karen and Joyce seemed to have the same feelings as their kids did because they too were in a hurry to leave.

‘If you want to go, we can go, I just don’t really want to go to lunch with these people,’ Joyce said.

‘Mom, it’s a bit selfish,’ said Jonathan.

Before she could defend herself, Will butted in.

‘I agree with you. These people couldn’t give two-shits.’

‘Will! We’re in a *church*!’

She wanted to scold him more but he was right.

Eventually, everyone agreed to take all the boys back to Mike’s place. Karen promised to order pizza.

And so, off they went, a day to themselves to forget about the Men on Mirkwood and the funeral of a soul who wasn’t truly cared for until it was too late. They had decided that grief wasn’t their style. Stopping it from happening again was the kind of legacy Jordan deserved. His death would *not* be for nothing.

Will scribbled some words down in his sketchbook on the way to Mike’s, on the back of the page that had the hitlist scribbled on it unceremoniously in red crayon. He was sure he’d heard them somewhere before but writing them helped him clear his head.

We need some help,

Down here on Earth.

A thousand prayers,

A million words.

But one voice was heard.

Mike arrived home to an odd surprise. A man was out the front of the house, leaning back on an old car. It had clearly been kept in good condition, Mike couldn't see a single scratch on the paint.

'Wait here,' Ted, Mike's dad, said. Mike saw his dad exchange some looks with the man. He walked back over.

'Michael.'

'Yes sir,' he replied.

'Did you enter a competition without asking? This man says he's from some university in California.'

'Oh, sorry Ted,' Karen butted in, 'He asked me, I said it was fine.'

'Oh, okay. Uhh, Mike, this man wants to speak to you.'

Mike got out of the car and approached the man in jeans and a white t-shirt, apprehensively.

'Hi, Michael?' Asked the man, extending his open palm.

'Yeah, hi,' Mike shook his hand nervously, yet firmly (*always make a firm handshake*, he could hear his dad's words in the back of his mind).

Lucas was walking over at this stage and ran to catch up to the encounter.

'Hi, I'm Steven from the California Institute of Technology. You entered our middle school computer science challenge, right?'

Mike suddenly remembered. The challenge asked you to break a code. Easy as cake. He did it in sixty seconds.

'Oh, right!'

‘Well, you won!’

‘Really?’ Mike asked.

He was somewhat surprised because on the bottom of his application, he wrote out a code of his own and asked them to break it.

‘Yeah, it took some of our PhD students some time to break your code.’

He handed Mike his application back. Under a *lot* of higher order mathematical working, he saw the words he’d encrypted successfully decoded:

M-A-K-E

Y-O-U-R

C-H-A-L-L-E-N-G-E-S

H-A-R-D-E-R

Karen looked over his shoulder and scoffed. He was a little shit in her *very* educated opinion. But a cute little shit. A little shit of whom she was proud.

‘Well, anyway, we actually pulled some strings and managed to get an early release for you.’ He gestured to a large, unmarked box in his car. ‘This is a trial system of the Apple Macintosh, that’s not meant to come out until next year. The computer retails at two-thousand, five hundred dollars next year’—Karen gasped—‘but to even *sign up* to the trial was three-thousand dollars alone. So have fun, Mike. Oh and also, we’ve included some books you might find interesting.’

Steven reached into the back of his car and withdrew a backpack, with “CALTECH” written on the back.

‘A few gifts, from some admirers in California. Our PhD cryptography students really like you. They’ve written their emails down somewhere in there too.’

‘*Thank you!*’ Was all Mike could say. He was so happy and so ecstatic. Lucas, who had now been standing there for most of the conversation could hardly believe his eyes.

By the time everyone else had arrived, Lucas and Mike had moved the Macintosh downstairs. Will saw Mike talk to Steven. He didn’t

hear much of the conversation but he gathered they were talking about college intakes. *Mike will probably get into CalTech*, he thought. Not that he ever doubted Mike would get into a good school. All that Will could hope was that he managed to get into UCLA. They had a great fine arts and computer graphics program – this was naturally something about which Will thought a lot.

The boys went inside for one more night of fun and games before their mission started. They played around on the Macintosh for a while. They were a little disappointed it didn't come with more games but Mike said he'd learn to code some. Before they played a part of Mike's newest *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign.

Eventually, Lucas and Dustin went home (for it was a school night). But given Joyce and Jonathan were both working, Will was allowed to stay over. Mike had taken the backpack of books to his room as soon as he got them, so he hadn't had a chance to look at them yet.

He pulled them out, one by one, as Will had come out of the shower and into Mike's room, wearing only his underwear. This had happened many times before but this was the first time Mike noticed himself paying attention. He wasn't quite sure why this time was different.

'So, what did you get?'

'I got these!' Mike spread the books out, all covered in plastic along his bed. Will read the titles in his head.

Computer Science and Mathematics: An Introduction

An Elementary Course in Computerised Codes

Higher Order Cryptography: A First Look

The Definitive Guide to Programming in C++

Information Technology, Cryptanalysis and Secrets in the New Century

Modern Database Design

Will could see how grateful Mike was. He was in heaven. Where many boy-geniuses might feel self-entitled or finally recognised, Mike was just happy. And that made Will happy. Will picked up his sketchbook and sat under the duvet on Mike's bed, stretching his legs underneath as he started to draw. Mike took off his shirt and (what he called) his "funeral" pants, leaving only his boxers on.

'Hey, Mikey.'

'Yeah,' Mike replied, looking fondly at Will.

'You're lookin' sexy.'

Mike looked down at himself.

'So you *do* think I look cute.'

Will looked at him, bamboozled.

'You picked me up yesterday in your basement and made out with me for who knows how long. And I didn't ask you to stop. In fact, I tugged your hair. It was *awesome*.'

Mike looked at him and did the shrug thing.

'For a natural code breaker, you're missing a pretty obvious one, Wheeler.'

'I'm guessing you do find me "cute", then?'

'You're gorgeous, you baboon.'

Mike's eyes lit up. He'd thought about it a lot today and he reached the inevitable conclusion that he'd wanted to be sexy. He wanted to be Will's sexy man. And one day, not today, but one day, he *definitely* wanted to have sex with Will. He wanted to go all the way. He loved Will more than anything in the world. As he was leaving the room to run for the bathroom with his pyjamas in tow, Will's words stopped him.

‘Mike.’

‘Yes!’ Mike said, poking his head back through the door.

‘Nice chest hair.’

A pin-drop silence ensued. Mike was so confused. A staccato ‘*THANKS!*’ was all he managed.

As Mike shut the door, Will smirked as he started drawing. He had a genius for a boyfriend. A genius, yet, the biggest goof he knew.

Mike stood in the bathroom, close to the mirror. He looked at his chest. The previously white hairs were starting to grow into a more defined black colour. Will must have noticed, he figured. He wasn’t going to be *the most* hairy man but he certainly had those subtle hints that indicated his chest wouldn’t look like a baby’s bottom within the coming years. He flexed his arm muscle and noticed it pop out. He was genuinely impressed. He was getting stronger - and every little bit more vain.

Once Mike had finished his (unnecessarily long) shower, he returned back to a happy Will, who was drawing contentedly in Mike’s bed. Mike’s hair was still damp and as he walked over to the bed, Will put his sketchbook down on Mike’s bedside table. He pulled Mike’s shirt.

‘Come ‘ere, cutie.’

‘Oka—’ before Mike could finish, Will was kissing him.

It started to get late. Time seemed to travel at high speed when they both were sitting with each other, doing what they loved. Will couldn’t help but think that this was the perfect state. The two of

them in a room, engaged by the things they loved doing. Will had drawn Mike in a CALTECH varsity jumper and himself in one that had "UCLA FINE ARTS" emblazoned on the front. On his side, he'd drawn pictures of crazy comic book characters, cameras, movie scenes and the Hollywood sign. On Mike's side, he'd drawn numbers and digits everywhere, as well as computers and textbooks. He'd drawn the pentagon in the background and drew Mike with big arms. Mike looked over and saw it.

'You're so goddamn talented,' he couldn't help but say.

'Says the one reading college textbooks,' Will responded, kissing Mike on the cheek.

He put his sketchbook down on Mike's bedside table. He rested his head on one of Mike's crossed legs. Looking up, he could see how intimately focused Mike was. It made Will happy that Mike could love doing something as much as Will loved to draw and create. At some point, Mike became aware that Will was laying on him.

'You wanna sleep?'

Will nodded.

Mike put his book down next to his bed, carefully placing a bookmark inside. He switched off his nightlight and cuddled Will, pulling him close and running his fingers along his arm. It seemed to calm Will down a lot. Will hated going to sleep, he could always remember his parents arguing after he'd gone to bed. Mike calmed him. He made him feel loved and safe.

'Hey Will,' Mike quietly whispered.

'Yeah,' Will said, half-asleep.

'You're really damn cute, too.'

Will kissed Mike's hand, grabbed his leg and draped it over his waist.

'Goodnight, my love,' whispered Will.

'Goodnight, cupcake,' Mike said, as kissed Will's neck. Will edged

back, closer to Mike.

Mike knew it would take Will thirty more seconds to fall asleep. After he was convinced Will was sleeping, he rolled over, switched on his nightlight once more and continued reading. He had so much to learn.

Mike was slowly discovering his passion. He always knew it would be something intensely scientific - engineering was always his thought. But nothing was more satisfying to Mike Wheeler than breaking, or making, codes. As Will said, Mike was a 'natural' code-breaker. And guess who used codes, more than anyone else?

The United States federal government.

6. SPECIAL CHAPTER A: The Boy Who Went Insane [PILOT]

Summary for the Chapter:

SPECIAL CHAPTER. This takes place outside the current universe of *The Crypto Kids*, portraying Mike and Will as they're older in an alternate timeline.

****HORROR THEMES, VIOLENT REFERENCES****

THE CRYPTO KIDS

SPECIAL CHAPTER A

People, this was inspired by season 2. This is an AU chapter (in an AU fic, but nvm that) in which Mike is a government scientist and Will is a subject in a government research facility. Depending on the popularity, I may continue with this and write *The Crypto Kids* as two parallel plots. **THIS PLOT IS SEPARATE FROM THE REST OF THE FIC.**

Another thing: THE FIC IS NOT DEAD! I am still here. I'm just *SUPER* busy with university, as well as other writing. The fic will return! I've done this in the meantime to give you guys something to have a look at - if you like it, I'll post another! I tried to be a bit creative and different with it, to say thanks for all the waiting over these past few months.

ALTERNATE UNIVERSE. HORROR THEMES. Many of our favourite *ST* characters are here in different forms. For now, they may not appear themselves; however, if I write more, they will come into their characters more directly and you will see how it all fits into this universe more easily. :)

ALLUSIONS TO SEASON 2 OF STRANGER THINGS. BEST YOU WATCH BEFORE YOU READ.

I hope you all like it. Honestly, it's super experimental and I'm a bit nervous.

**MATURE THEMES. VIOLENT REFERENCES. HORROR THEMES.
READER DISCRETION ADVISED.**

THE CRYPTO KIDS CHAPTER A:

THE BOY WHO WENT INSANE [PILOT]

Dr. Michael Wheeler, codename **The Paladin**, had been called to the Antarctic for some inexplicable reason. Once again, the US government was making use of his unfortunate position as a government scientist to do something he would really rather *not* do. You see, Doctor Wheeler's speciality was a kind of science that many could not understand. It started when Mike was a child; he developed an interest in computer systems and computer hardware. Naturally, he was interested in cryptography, which was the study of breaking, creating and understanding codes and encryption. Mike, now in his early 40s, had focused his interests in codes on a different type of work. Now, Mike was interested in the way that people were codes, or in basic terms, genetics. Michael Wheeler became *Doctor* Michael Wheeler with his theory of Genetic Unification, that all human attributes could be explained through genetic codes. Whilst many in the academic community disagreed with him, he really didn't seem overly interested in their opinion or points of view. Mike was a handsome man with a childish complexion, most noted by his frizzy black hair and freckled cheeks and nose.

Doctor Henderson, Mike's research partner, was an experimental biologist and Mike's childhood friend. Now, one might make an

obvious point here and state that *all* biologists were experimental biologists, for biology is a science and science expands through experimentation. However, Doctor Dustin Henderson was known for his first study of a new kind of species, known as *Analphlargus*, although many preferred the common term: “The Demon Reptile”. As a child, Dustin liked to venture into the forests around the small town from which Mike and he originated: Hawkins, Indiana. While Mike always played around with their two-way radios and eventually other methods of communication, Dustin liked to search through the forests. One day, in the October of 1984, he found a small slug of some description. He could not identify it, which wouldn’t be unusual for an obscure creature, given his middle school science education hadn’t yet been completed, let alone anything beyond. But as he investigated further, he slowly realised that this creature was unlike any creature on earth. It killed his family cat in its third stage of evolution and was able to build tunnels under his house. Yet, Dustin managed to contain and study the creature, with Mike studying its genetic code - beginning Mike’s interest in biological code altogether.

Neither of them believed that they would be currently in a futuristic aircraft that collected them from the Department of Energy National Lab at UC Berkeley, where they had been working on classified government research, naturally in exchange for extremely bloated salaries that might make the average American taxpayer gawp. Suddenly, on their way to work this morning, they had been collected by two US government officials and taken to a remote, desolate location on the outskirts of California where nothing grows and nobody cares. They were ordered into this unmarked aircraft that flew at hypersonic speed in the stratosphere, well above any detection threshold. They didn’t really get a good look at it, it all happened so quickly. Mike could deduce that their heading indicated south, yet how south he could not be sure. The speed of the aircraft was unimaginable.

‘Mike, any idea on where we are going?’ Dustin finally said.

‘I have about as much idea as you do,’ sighed Mike. Mike was not in a good mood. He was progressing well with his research and would rather not have to tolerate any disruptions.

He checked his phone, hoping to be able to call the head of the DoE.

No reception. *Then again*, Mike thought, *we are in the stratosphere. Or something.*

After what seemed like an eternity, a tall, broad shouldered figure emerged from the front of the aircraft. Upon closer look, Mike noticed his African American decent and strong facial features. He spoke in a deep voice.

‘Gentleman, I am sure you’re wondering where we are headed.’

‘You know, I hadn’t considered it,’ retorted Mike. Dustin nudged him.

‘In any case, my name is Doctor Lucas Sinclair. I work for the US government and I am in charge of this operation.’

‘And what exactly is *this* operation,’ Dustin followed.

Lucas sighed.

‘What I am about to tell you is classified of the highest nature. If you repeat any of this, you may find yourself in an’—he paused for dramatic effect—‘accident.’

Mike rolled his eyes.

‘We’ve been through this classified bullshit before. If you wouldn’t mind, could you get to the point?’ Mike was now exceptionally impatient, having a person in front of him onto whom he could target his repressed animosity.

‘Very well,’ Lucas sighed. *This Mike guy might not be worth it*, Lucas thought to himself. ‘My speciality is clinical psychology, specifically looking at prisoners. But not any type of prisoners, not your serial killers or arsonists, or state traitors. No, my specialty is high IQ prisoners. The prisoners that we simply cannot contain on US soil. The prisoners we can’t tell anyone about, simply for public sanity. We keep them buried in the ice. We are keeping them away from the world because they are too dangerous to live within proximity to any other people.’

Mike and Dustin were paying attention, yet they seemed uninterested.

‘Okay, so what?’ Said Mike.

‘Hardly our area,’ added Dustin.

‘We have a special case that we cannot understand, Doctor Wheeler. Something new. Something we cannot explain.’

Mike did a gesture with his hands, as if to say “get on with it”.

‘One of our patients, a certain William Byers, has’—he paused again, but this time it wasn’t for dramatic effect, it was something else—‘abilities. Abilities we can’t explain. Claims he’s been possessed by some sort of demon.’

‘Schizophrenia. Solved it before we even got there.’ Mike asserted. ‘You’re a lousy psychologist for not picking that up.’

Lucas regarded Mike with a consciously stern look.

‘He can kill people by looking at them. He can walk through walls. He can see everything. He can manipulate people like you won’t believe.’

‘What do you mean he can *see everything*?’ Dustin asked.

‘I mean what I said, Doctor Henderson. I mean he can see *everything*. He can read minds, he can tell us where things are in the world. He named the location of the new geosynchronous Defence satellites that have gone up over China and Korea. He knows everything, almost by instinct. We tried to IQ test him but the tests were inconclusive.’

‘Why,’ asked Mike and Dustin at once.

‘He killed the assessor by looking at him in a certain way.’

‘So if this individual is as dangerous as you think, why are you bringing *us* to him?’

‘The only person so far who has been able to speak to him has been me and his supervisor It’s only because I’ve been smart enough to counteract his manipulations. Doctor Wheeler, you are the smartest man in the country, or at least one of them. We are hoping that you

might be able to make a break-through, possibly with your genetic research. We want to know what's there.'

'I'd need a DNA sample to conduct that kind of research.'

'So convince him to let you take one.'

Mike and Dustin looked at each other for a second.

'Hang on a minute,' Mike said. 'You want his DNA because you want to replicate it, don't you? You want to *weaponise* this, don't you?'

Lucas regarded Mike with practiced professional proficiency. 'What the United States choses to do with the information you find for us is none of your concern, Doctor Wheeler. We pay you a lion's share for both your intelligence and your silence.'

'So, you want to weaponise something you know nothing about. That has worked so well for us in the past. Hiroshima, for example.'

'Doctor Wheeler, it may have escaped your notice, but there has not been another world war since that weapon was deployed. This world is made up of good and bad and I firmly believe we are the good. I hope you do too.' Lucas's tone undulated in exasperation.

But Mike could remember something else. Something that he could only attribute to repressed adolescent memories, safely locked away where the insecurities of two young nerds cannot compromise the stability of two adult professionals.

'Lucas, or whatever your name is, got a profile on this guy?' Mike seemed slightly more co-operative.

'Check your email,' said Lucas, as he walked away, presumably to confer with someone more important than Lucas or Dustin.

Mike quickly removed his iPad from his work bag and opened his email.

'Dustin, look.'

The profile read:

WILLIAM BYERS

BIRTHPLACE:
HAWKINS, IN.

D.O.B.:
03.22.71

SIGNIFICANCE:
GENETIC MUTATION: COGNITIVE CAPACITY

DIAGNOSIS:
PSYCHOSIS, PSYCHOPATHY, UNKNOWN

CURRENTLY HELD:
CLASSIFIED

SEX: MALE

CURRENT LOCATION:
CLASSIFIED

DEPARTMENT RESPONSIBLE:
DEFENSE ADVANCED RESEARCH PROJECTS AGENCY

‘Holy shit,’ Dustin said. ‘It’s the kid who went crazy from school.’

Mike suddenly remembered. The flurry of media articles that arose, when Hawkins was suddenly thrown into the spotlight. Will Byers, the quiet weird kid that went crazy. There were so many rumours. Some say he was killed by ‘poofster bashers’, something Mike himself had faced as a young gay man in the 80s, in small town Indiana. Others say he went crazy and killed people in a nearby town. Others just think he ran away. Everyone had their own theory.

Mike was the only one who had been nice to him. They played chess together in the library every Friday for two years and he had shown Mike his drawings. Mike had taught him about computers, even

going so far as to teach him BASIC and about public key cryptography, a relatively new invention at the time. He seemed like the sweetest young man and Mike was inconsolable when he left. Really, Mike had never been the same since (not that Mike would admit that). Will had found a part of Mike that he had since not recovered. In hindsight, Will was definitely Mike's first (and only) love. Will was Mike's first kiss and to this day, Mike had not found that in another person. Until this very moment, Mike hadn't thought about it for over ten years, contenting himself with his work and his dog. He sensed this would no longer be an option.

'Dustin, I—'

Dustin waved his hand at his best friend.

'Don't worry, it's fine. You don't have to explain anything.'

The aircraft eventually landed after what seemed like an eternity. It landed in a cut out on the Antarctic shelf, as if a door in the ice opened up Nobody really knew where they were, not even those who worked at the installation. Naturally, the US government would rather that people *did not* know about its secret facility, in which the most dangerous "humans" are kept.

Aberforth, as it was called, was a secret prison installation that housed the world's most deadly and dangerous. It was an international effort, although under the jurisdiction of the US government. It was buried deep inside the Antarctic shelf and housed a significant amount of classified military technology, most of which was focused on, not keeping people out, but rather keeping the unique subjects *in*. Normal prisons on the US mainland were for, in the words of the Department of Defence, "stupid criminals", while Aberforth was for the criminals that are simply too *something else* to be contained. By "Something else," it was suggested that they could do something that others could not, or that they were something that

other were not. Many of these were high intelligence criminals, most of whom had IQs over 170. One was a scientist that attempted to cause an earthquake on the San Andreas Fault by increasing the pressure between the two continental plates. The idea was to detonate small explosives at specifically defined points across the fault's boundary, leading to a catastrophic release of pressure. Thankfully, the NSA caught onto his idea and he was imprisoned. While in prison, he found a way to restructure the pipes in the prison so that the heating ducts fused with the water passages, while breaking the pipes at certain parts in his cell wall. The combination of water exceeding 100 degrees Celsius and the continuous pressure of said liquid hitting age-old brick (the private prison company saw no need to expend the resources necessary to maintain the walls), meant that the concrete simply eroded over a short period of time; the wall collapsed and he was able to escape his cell by simply walking out. Another inhabitant of Aberforth had a genetic mutation that prevented her from being able to perceive certain types of matter. She was being studied by neuroscientists as she was unable to perceive certain alloys, although she could see through them. One such alloy was Duralumin. Duralumin is the primary metal in the construction of aircraft; it's approximately 98% aluminum and 2% copper with traces of manganese and other elements. She immediately turned her gift against the government by ensconcing herself outside US airbases and selling the contents or weapons of the planes, that she could see, to hostile foreign powers or terrorist groups. When she was arrested, she had over thirty-two billion US dollars in Cayman bank accounts. When she was placed in a normal prison, she was able to see enough walls to navigate over three hundred escapes. In doing so, she also killed over one hundred guards and twice as many inmates. Aberforth also housed cannibals, uncontrollable psychopaths and people that, for all intents and purposes, should not exist. The prison was a purpose-built hell.

Mike and Dustin were shuffled through an insulated corridor, that looked like the inside of an air-conditioning tube. It was cylindrical and silver coloured with a walkway in the centre. As the two scientists were shuffled through an unnavigable labyrinth of corridors, they caught only glimpses of what Aberforth really was. Mike swore that he saw a scientist with half of his head clawed off, while Dustin could have sworn he literally saw a zombie.

‘Eyes ahead, gentleman’ Lucas would command, every time their vision wondered. ‘The secrecy is for your safety, trust me.’

Eventually, they approached a large, titanium door. Mike observed that it must have been over a cubed metre in thickness and at least five metres in height. Once they passed through the door, they entered a pitch black space until the door closed, when the room was immediately lit in red.

‘Eyes adjust to it easier,’ Lucas explained.

It was at this point that Mike and Dustin met Doctor Jane Hopper, the clinical neuropsychologist charged with studying and monitoring who she referred to as “The Client”, i.e., William Byers. Jane had curly brown hair, drawn back behind her lab coat’s hood. She had piercing brown eyes and seemed to be captivated by the two new scientists. Dustin made the quiet observation that this was probably because she didn’t really speak to other people, given the nature of her work. Mike and Dustin were told to immediately only refer to her as her codename, from this point forward: Eleven.

Eleven went through many of the different times The Client had “caused trouble” for the facility. He once ‘possessed’ a nurse, who then went home and killed the first born son of every family on her street. He also once attempted to take control of Eleven’s mind but due to her IQ, she was able to withstand his abilities.

‘It’s like, it’s like he reprograms people, or something. As if he can push you out of the driver’s seat of your own mind. He couldn’t do it with me, or at least, if he could, he stopped. He can kill you, with his mind as well. Honestly, we are all at a loss with it.’

Dustin, terrified by this, stood as far away from the lift that went down to The Client’s asylum. Mike listened intently to everything Eleven had to say.

‘He claims he’s been *possessed* by some “Evil demon” from the “Shadow Realm”, or whatever and that it makes him do things to people. Claims it’s not him.’

‘When can I see him?’ Mike was hesitant to ask but he had to know.

Eleven sighed. 'You can see him when you like but just know that if you die down there, the government will make your death look like an accident, Doctor Wheeler. You were never here. This place doesn't exist, nor has it ever, nor will it in the future.'

Mike sighed. He hated "government people", even though he was one himself. A healthy disrespect for authority is something that Mike cherished.

As Mike got into the opaque, cylindrical lift, barely accommodating enough for one person, Eleven had to check with him.

'Doctor, are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'We know about your history with him, are you sure this is the best choice?'

Mike sighed. 'It's why I'm here, isn't it? My IQ and of course, my history. I'm not a negotiator.' *They couldn't know the history in full anyway*, thought Mike.

'Very well.'

In a millisecond, the elevator door swivelled shut and Mike once again faced a claustrophobic, vacuous darkness. He could hear the *whurrrrrr* of the lift as it descended and his ears started to depressurise as he fell well below sea level. The lift started to creak, like a World War Two submarine, barely coping below depths. It started to wobble on its track, with Mike barely managing to hold onto a perfectly smooth wall. Mike's nerves started to overtake his nostalgia for the first time, yet he was still determined to meet his long-lost love.

Suddenly, the lift shuddered to a stop and the door swivelled open at the same high speed with which it had closed. Mike was immediately greeted by the most unusual sight he had ever seen. It was like a Polar Bear exhibit at a zoo. Unlike the rest of the Aberforth facility, which was well situated within the ice in a highly technological operation, a marvel of modern geo-engineering, William's cell was

simply *on* the ice. It had modern seats, a television and a bookcase, as well as enough art supplies to keep Picasso and Da Vinci happy all at once. He even had a Wacom graphics tablet. There were drawings and sculptures all over the floor. Shielding the lift from this was a panel of glass, which Mike assumed was thick enough to be holding back the immense cold that must be contained on the other side. *The guy must be frozen*, Mike thought.

Mike stepped forward nervously, testing the ground as though one might test for landmines. He stepped so quietly, as he could see Will, who was laying on a formation of ice in nothing but Armani boxer shorts. He assumed Will was sleeping and did not want to disturb him. As Mike approached the glass, a microphone activated.

‘I’ve been expecting you.’ Will’s voice nearly gave Mike a heart attack as it radiated through the imperceptible stereo speakers that surrounded Mike.

‘W-W-Will,’ was all Mike could conceivably manage.

‘It’s me, Mike.’

‘I-I missed you.’

‘I know,’ said Will, turning to look at Mike with the mechanical dexterity of an alarmed robot. Mike noticed that Will had blood red eyes and a terrifyingly large smile.

‘I’ve been watching.’

Up in the control room, chaos had come upon the inhabitants. Dustin had lost consciousness (although this was because Lucas had slipped an anaesthetic into the coffee he made for him), Eleven had lost all power to her computer systems and seemed unable to make contact with anyone outside the control room. The Client’s control room was

off limits unless Lucas himself gave anyone permission to enter. Aberforth staff were under strict instructions not to enter the room, should anything happen. So, even if they were in mortal danger, nobody was coming to help. Eleven and Lucas were sweating like rugby players on a hot Summer's day, as the room's heating had automatically increased due to emergency protocols.

All of a sudden, the room went to the empty dark that seemed to be replaying throughout this facility. Then, a single text in a clear, red font appeared on every screen in the control room.

REMEMBER OUR DEAL, JANE.

I GET MIKE, YOU GET JIM.

REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU BREAK MY RULES, JANE.

REMEMBER.

Lucas looked at Eleven, placing his hands over his face.

‘Christ, what have we done.’

Will starred at Mike from a distance.

‘You’ll have to pardon the cold. He likes it this way,’ Will declared, monotonously.

‘It’s, umm, it’s fine. Will, I, uhh, want to ask you something.’

Will stood up and towards the glass. Will had grown into a handsome adult, with well defined abdominal muscles and thick biceps despite his lean build.

Will laughed as he approached the glass.

‘I’m not a zoo animal, Mike. I’m the boy who kissed you, remember!’

‘I remember.’

‘I know,’ Will offered with a wink. When his eye opened, it flickered brown, before returning to a fiery red. ‘So stop prodding me like a zoo animal! Ask me what you want to ask me!’ Will had an even wider smile.

‘What are you doing here?’

Will’s expression changed. His face became red and his pupils retracted to a small size.

‘Nobody ever tells me.’

‘They say it’s because you’re a danger to others, that you’re bad. I don’t think you—’

‘Bad is a funny word, isn’t it, Michael?’ Will’s voice had changed tone, to a more soft, sweet frequency. It violated Mike’s ears with a type of harmony that he could not describe.

‘Bad, bad is such a great story.’

‘I only meant that—’

‘Bad!’ Will yelled, imitating being scared. ‘Things are bad when we want people to hate them! It is merely an arbitrary emotional attachment to a condition we are forced to believe in order to survive. Bad is good and good is bad, bad is bad and good is good. Nothing is nothing and nothing is everything. We are nothing but a collection of atoms that nature has assembled. Dust and unto dust. You are a prisoner of your own conditioning.’

‘Aren’t you too?’

‘No,’ said Will, with firm definition. ‘I’m too smart.’

There was a pause between the two.

‘What did they tell you, Michael, that I’m insane? That you ought to

be careful?’

Mike nodded.

‘I’ve always been someone you need to be careful around, Michael. Isn’t that true?’

Mike’s eyes widened.

‘Your father still doesn’t know, does he Michael? Good old Teddy Wheeler couldn’t have that, could he? A *homo* in the family. He’d be disgusted, wouldn’t he, Michael? You would disgust your own father, wouldn’t you, Michael?’

A tear rolled down Mike’s cheek.

‘Will, why would you—’

‘You’re ashamed of who you are, Michael, and that’s why you’ve never been okay, isn’t it? Answer me, Michael. Answer me, Michael. It’s why. It’s why, isn’t it, Michael?’

Mike drew closer to the glass, his eyes watering with tears, yet remaining completely open. Mike seemed unable to blink. Will’s voice got louder.

‘I’m in your head now, Michael. I am you and you are me and I am in control. You love me, Michael. You always have. I love you too, Michael. I can protect you from your father, Michael. He’ll never love you, not like he loves Nancy. Not like I do, Michael. He’ll never accept you. Be with me, Michael, be with me and together, we can have everything. We can have our love. I know you’ve never been the same because I’ve never been the same. We are each other, Michael, once and forever.’

Mike’s eyes were covered in salty tears and his eyes slowly changed colour to red.

‘Michael, tell me, tell me what you wanted to over all these years. Tell me, Michael. Don’t be ashamed, Michael. My childhood sweetheart. The Paladin. The only one who was nice to me. My saviour, Michael. That’s you, Michael. The man who saved me. Show

me who you are. Show me who we could be. Together, we will be as one. We can have it all, Michael. Together and forever, all at once. All you have to say is—‘

‘I do, William Byers.’

‘Good.’ Will smiled widely again. ‘Step as close to me as you can and listen very carefully about what I am about to say.’

Will started softly singing. The harmony in his voice worked its magic in Mike’s mind.

‘I am you,

we are me,

off we all go,

all of us three.’

And just like that, Michael Wheeler collapsed onto the floor, tears spilling from his eyes, that were twitching violently under tightly closed eye lids.

Will shook violently, his eyes momentarily changing to a brown colour, filling with tears.

‘Mike! I’m so sorry! I’m SORRY, Mike. Please forgive me! I didn’t mean t—‘

His eyes changed to a blood red colour and his evil demeanour returned.

‘Today will be a good day,’ Will remarked, with the widest smile he’d ever had.

7. WATCH THIS SPACE

Hi everyone!

I just wanted to give you all an update!! This fic is NOT dead! I will be uploading the final three chapters (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) when the next season of Stranger Things is released!!

THANKS FOR BEING SO PATIENT < 3

Peace.